for the ones who think they can

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/20792354.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	The Umbrella Academy (TV)
Relationship:	Number Five | The Boy & Klaus Hargreeves
Characters:	Klaus Hargreeves, Number Five | The Boy (Umbrella Academy), The Handler (Umbrella Academy)
Additional Tags:	Ghost!Klaus, Post-Apocalypse, The Commission, it's Commission time babey, Codependency
Language:	English
Series:	Part 7 of Comes And Goes (In Waves)
Collections:	Time Travel Fics That Water My Crops, Carefully Curated Works of Art, love and big apprish to the writers and betas and podfic creators of these pieces
Stats:	Published: 2019-09-27 Completed: 2019-11-01 Words: 36,430 Chapters: 17/17

for the ones who think they can

by hujwernoo

Summary

There is a woman standing in front of Five.

This is far more unexpected than it sounds. As far as Five was aware, there were no women left alive on the planet. It's kind of arguable if Delores counts, but even if she did she doesn't have legs and thus couldn't stand.

Five was under the (well-substantiated) impression that he himself is the last living human on the planet. Klaus is the last ghost, as well. They've spent the past eighteen years that way, and Five didn't expect it to change until he figures out the last of his equations and they jump back.

But now there is a living, breathing, human woman standing in front of them, and if Klaus' panic attack is anything to go by there's just been a significant increase in the local ghost population.

Five has always hated not knowing what the *fuck* is going on.

After eighteen years of surviving the apocalypse, Klaus and Five receive an unexpected offer that lets them leave it behind. Now all they have to worry about is surviving the Commission.

Notes

Alright, you guys, here we go! And just like last time, THE ENTIRE STORY IS WRITTEN ALREADY, and I'll be updating on a M/W/F schedule, except I'll be posting the last two chapters together. Okay? Okay.

And so, I give you, the moment you've all been waiting for:

- Translation into Français available: TRAD - for the ones who think they can by Loclo4

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a woman standing in front of Five.

This is far more unexpected than it sounds. As far as Five was aware, there were no women left alive on the planet. It's kind of arguable if Delores counts, but even if she did she doesn't have legs and thus couldn't stand.

Five was under the (well-substantiated) impression that he himself is the last living human on the planet. Klaus is the last ghost, as well. They've spent the past eighteen years that way, and Five didn't expect it to change until he figures out the last of his equations and they jump back.

But now there is a living, breathing, human woman standing in front of them, and if Klaus' panic attack is anything to go by there's just been a significant increase in the local ghost population.

Five has always hated not knowing what the *fuck* is going on.

"What does that mean?" he snaps at her, moving to place himself in front of Klaus. There have been very few times where Five has seen him this scared, and he imagines that his own shock at seeing another person must be magnified tenfold for Klaus, who is seeing the return of the ghosts he's always been so afraid of.

"Just what I said," the woman - the Handler, she called herself - says, smiling. She moves her hands, and Five nearly jumps to stab her before he sees she's only taking out a cigarette. He still remains on high alert, the only thing taking away any attention from her is Klaus on the ground behind him. It sounds like he's still hyperventilating.

Five wants so badly to turn around and hold him until he stops shaking, like Klaus always did for him, but he can't turn his back on whoever this woman is. He glares at her.

She raises an eyebrow. "I work for The Commission. We are an organization dedicated to preserving the timeline. Making sure everything that should happen, happens."

Five stares at her.

The concept is….ludicrous, he wants to say, but then again so is the concept of forty-three women around the world spontaneously giving birth to babies with superpowers. Five has always wondered whether there were other inexplicable things out there, because in all other respects the world has always seemed perfectly normal. Perfectly, utterly ordinary in every way, except for one. So it would make sense that there are other strange things out there, and there's nothing saying that one of those strange things can't be an organization called The Commission that 'preserves the timeline'.

And as much as Five wants to find holes in her story, he's kind of distracted by the fact that he's talking to an actual living person for the first time in nearly two decades. It's rattling and offputting and he *knows* he's completely on the back foot, even moreso with Klaus defenseless and terrified behind him, and from the self-assured confidence she carries with her like a mantle she knows she has the upper hand here.

"....Okay," Five says slowly. "So you preserve the timeline. And - you can time-travel."

"Naturally," she says. She takes a puff of her cigarette.

"Why don't you fix this?" Five gestures to the wasteland surrounding him. "Make it so it never happened?"

Except he knows the answer as soon as he says it, and the amused look on her face just clinches it. "Because it was *meant* to happen, Five. We don't fix what's not broken."

The unfamiliar sound of someone other than Klaus or Delores saying his name is almost enough to distract him from the surge of anger that roars up at the rest of her words.

"Not broken?" he repeats incredulously. "Everyone's *dead!* It's the end of *everything!*"

"Not the end of everything," she says. "Just the end of - something."

Five grits his teeth so hard he thinks his jaw might break. "So what?" he says. "Why are you here, if this is what you want?"

"Do you need your hearing checked, Five?" she chides, looking slightly annoyed now. Five feels a sense of accomplishment at putting that look on her face. "I said I have a proposition for you two."

"And that is?" he snaps. Klaus has gone worryingly silent, and Five thinks he might have fallen off the physical plane. He hasn't done that on accident in nearly a decade, and in light of that Five is not feeling a lot of patience towards the Handler.

"You two survivalists are quite popular back at the office, you know," she says. "And someone had the idea of offering you a job. Five years of service each, in exchange for getting out of here and eventually retiring to the time period of your choice. What do you say?"

Five is….speechless.

He remembers Reginald Hargreeves, the man he refused to call 'father' as soon as he understood what the word meant, because that man was not a father. He remembers cameras throughout the house, staring down at them with baleful red light, recording every moment. He remembers being painfully, constantly *aware* that every movement he made was recorded and saved and looked over by Reginald's critical, uncompromising eye.

He thought that was done. He thought he was free of that. Eighteen years, and the one thing good about the apocalypse was that Reginald's special brand of torture and surveillance was gone from his life. He could do what he wanted, whenever he wanted, because no one was

there to see it. No one there to set up tests or judgements or take pleasure from watching him fail over and over again.

And now he finds that people….people *knew* about them? Knew about their struggles and triumphs and obstacles over the years? Their arguments and traditions and jokes and compromises, formed over and over again, each time stronger than the last? Their grief for their family, their longing to return home, their work to get there, their hope that they could save everyone? People *knew* about all of that, and saw it as - as ***entertainment?***

Five remembers when he lost his arm. Those days were harrowing, and painful, and altogether horrible. Five was crippled for life, and even if he's used to it now it was just so *avoidable.* Klaus nearly went insane, and Five didn't know enough to stop it until it was almost too late. It remains the darkest time they ever went through, months of struggle and despair followed by *years* of recovery. It made them stronger, but it also nearly broke them.

The Commission watched that.

And they didn't **care.**

Five feels something hot and ugly rising inside him. He stares at the Handler, standing there with her smug little smile and burning cigarette.

She tilts her head a little. A silent question. *Well?*

He wants to jump over to her and snap her neck. He wants to pull out the knife he keeps on his hip and sink it into her chest (between the ribs, directly into the heart - he remembers his training). He wants to fall to his knees and scream and scream and s c r e a m.

But.

But he can't. He can't, and it takes several seconds to find all of his reasoning because his emotions are blotting out rationality, taking over his brain, and he promised himself that wouldn't happen again but *he wants to kill her.*

Except he can't, and he struggles to list the reasons why as the silence rolls out between them.

One: Klaus. Klaus comes first, he always comes first, and right now Klaus is behind him having a panic attack because there are ghosts, and Five cannot add another one. His fingers itch to end the Handler's life, but then he would just be shunting the problem off to Klaus, who has no way to deal with his fear of ghosts anymore, not after eighteen years of atrophy. Klaus wouldn't be able to survive. So Five cannot kill her, no matter how much he wants to, because Klaus needs him not to and he will *always* do what Klaus needs him to do. Doing anything else is unthinkable. That one reason is enough to make him calm down and analyse the situation more intelligently. He takes a deep breath and thinks.

Two: 'Organization' implies numbers. It implies many, many more people than just one person, especially if they look after the entirety of human history. However much Five hates the Handler, if he kills her she'll probably just be replaced. She's a *representative* of The

Commission, not the actual Commission itself. Killing her would be briefly satisfying, but ultimately gains him nothing.

Three: If the scope of the Commission is as large as the Handler implies, he needs to find out more. Not just because such an important part of the world has slipped by his notice and he needs to rectify that immediately (although that is part of it), but because *they want the apocalypse to happen.* They wanted it to happen, they may have even helped engineer it, they consider his family's death the *preferable outcome* -

They will try to prevent him from stopping the apocalypse.

Five stares at the Handler.

"What kind of job?" he croaks out.

She raises an eyebrow. "Our *modus operandi* is to find irregularities in the timeline and then….remove them. Usually via assassination. I understand you're quite good at killing people, Number Five. And your brother's abilities would be *incredible* in the field."

That, Five thinks with a dawning sense of horror, would probably be the reason Klaus is freaking out. He doesn't know how often The Commission kills people, but there must be a *lot* of ghosts around this woman. She has that air.

Five's first thought is to reject her.

It's not that he couldn't do it. Five knows his abilities and his morals very well, and neither prevent him from killing people. He'd killed a double-digit number of people by the time he was thirteen, and it never really troubled him - score one for Reginald's desensitization training. He would make an excellent assassin, and while he wouldn't precisely *like* it he wouldn't drown in regret and guilt. If it got him back to his family, let him *save* them, he wouldn't care at all.

Klaus, though.

Klaus is the sticking point. Just as Five knows himself, he knows Klaus, and his brother wouldn't be able to handle working as an assassin. Even on top of seeing the ghosts of his victims following him around everywhere he goes, there's the shock of being pulled back into a world of constant noise and gore. They've discussed the problem several times over the years, how Klaus will have to adjust once they go back, how he'll have to build up his walls again and find new coping mechanisms and pray to god that being a ghost himself will grant him some form of immunity. Klaus is terrified of going back, Five knows, and even if he's agreed to it that doesn't mean he isn't happier here.

It was difficult for Five to accept that. Very difficult.

But accept it he did, and the thought of throwing Klaus back into the world of his nightmares and *making him kill people as well* is -

He can't do that.

But he can't say no, either.

"One day," Five says abruptly. "Come back in one day, and you'll have our answer."

The Handler raises an eyebrow incredulously. "You want a grace period? Five -"

"You have time-travel," Five snaps. "Don't tell me this is a concession for you."

The Handler looks at him speculatively. Five resists the urge to kill her all over again.

"Well. Alright," she says, and smiles. "I'll see you in a day."

Then she's gone. Vanished, like she was never there at all.

Five refuses to crane his neck around like a moron searching for her. Either she's well and truly gone, or she isn't and can observe him without him being any the wiser. Apparently it's been going on for *years.*

Instead, Five turns around. Sure enough, there's no sign of Klaus.

Five swallows. Even after eighteen years, he always gets a little, niggling feeling of nervousness whenever he's alone. It's not rational, because he *knows* Klaus would never leave him, would never break his promise, but those first six months of the apocalypse are always crouching in his memory, waiting to ambush him at the slightest hint of similarity. The stillness, the desolation, the *silence* -

"Klaus?" Five says. "Klaus, she's gone. Are the ghosts gone?"

There's no answer. Five can admit that he wasn't expecting one, just from that.

Five sits down, carefully, on the dusty ground. He looks at where Klaus last was.

"Klaus," he says. "It's okay. She's gone. You can come back now. The ghosts are gone. Just come back to the physical plane. Breathe. They're all gone, just breathe. In, and out. In, and out…."

It takes twenty minutes of talking in a calm, even tone for Klaus to reappear. He looks twitchy, ragged at the edges. He blinks slowly at Five, like he's underwater.

"Five?" Klaus says uncertainly.

"Klaus," Five breathes out, and despite the situation, can't help but feel an overwhelming sense of relief. "Hey. We need to talk."

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I think Five is overestimating the amount of surveillance the Commission has posted on them, but he's a little bit touchy about that kind of thing.

So! Thoughts?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I posted chapter 9 of 'it comes and goes', too, check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes a couple of hours until they're situated back at the base. The old one, at the library, where they first settled. The basement rooms were all cleared out in the move, of course, but there are still clear marks of habitation scattered around. The stars painted on all the ceilings, the mismatched furniture populating the rooms, the random scribbles on the walls where Five had some brilliant insight that couldn't wait twenty seconds to find a piece of paper (Klaus tried to train him out of that, but the best he could do was get him to carry around a few spare notecards, and those things fill up *fast*).

It was the first home Klaus could ever describe as such with a straight face. The first place he ever felt really, genuinely happy. If he had to choose anywhere to go to, it would be here. He's grateful that Five does so.

They're set up in the common room - Klaus, Five, and Delores. When Five lights the lamp, the walls are thrown into stark relief, and even if they're jarringly bare it's still a comforting sight.

They took most of the decorations with them when they moved. It was a bitch and a half, and Klaus actually had to run back and forth between the cities a couple times to get everything, but they managed. The car they took was a different one than the one they have now, and it ran marginally smoother. It only broke down twenty-seven times during the journey. Sadly, it gave out five miles from their new home, and Klaus spent the next week finishing the job. Sometimes it sucked to have superhuman stamina. He always had to do the carrying.

Five leans back on the couch, and sighs. Klaus refocuses his attention on his brother.

"Well," Five says, and glances at Klaus. "Are you okay?"

Klaus bites his lip, and gives a minute shrug.

Two decades ago, he would have deflected - hell, maybe one decade ago he would have deflected. But he's given up on any of that when it comes to Five. They've lived in each other's pocket long enough that trying to keep secrets is vaguely ridiculous.

"Not really," Klaus says. If he had a real throat anymore, he knows it would be scratchy and hoarse from all the screaming.

Five nods. "Okay," he says. He holds out his arm in invitation.

Klaus leans in without hesitation. Five's hugs aren't the strongest, what with only having half as many arms as other people, but they're the only genuine hugs Klaus can remember getting, so they're pretty much perfect. He wriggles around until he's hugging back, and they sit there for a while.

"What do you remember about what she said?" Five says at last.

Klaus thinks back. He instinctively flinches at the memory of the ghosts, but he tries to push them aside and focus on what was apparently a real living person in the mix.

"The woman with the veil?" he says. "That was the one you were talking to, right?"

Five tenses slightly, then deliberately relaxes. "Yeah. Her."

"....Dunno," Klaus says. He strains. "Something about….an offer?"

"That's it?"

Klaus can't help the tiny flinch at that. "Yeah."

Because no matter how useful his powers have been these past eighteen years, Klaus still remembers a childhood full of sneers and rolled eyes and dismissiveness. Klaus was always the useless one, the load, the one that held everyone back and didn't contribute anything. He was never an asset on missions, never achieved anything impressive in training, never figured out how to apply *seeing the dead* to *people with guns* and get a favorable result. Being The Seance was zero upside and all downside. His powers defined and devastated him his whole life, and only in death was he able to look at them and start to see something *good.*

Five once mentioned to Klaus that his powers allowed Five roughly 90% more leeway in his apocalyptic lifestyle than if Klaus weren't there. Klaus teased him relentlessly for the next several weeks about it, but something he'll never admit out loud is just how heavily that affected him. Hearing that his powers are useful - not just useful, but valuable, maybe even *indispensable* - is something Klaus gave up on hearing a long, long time ago. Over the past eighteen years, Five has loosened up even more, and freely tells Klaus that his powers are incredible and fascinating and, yes, indispensable. Klaus thinks he might even believe Five when he says Klaus is all of those things, too.

Except today, that all came crashing down. The reappearance of ghosts is something Klaus harbors a not-so-secret dread for, and he's been trying to avoid thinking about it. Going back home is still a ways off, after all, and with as many setbacks as Five has been suffering lately it seems further off than ever. Klaus wants to see his siblings again, he really does, and he wants to save them and the world because no matter how little he likes either they don't deserve to die. But the idea of succeeding is tempered by the fact that if they do, then Klaus will be preserving the hell he lived his entire life in. Thousands upon thousands of mangled, screaming corpses, all clawing and shouting and grasping at him, tireless and neverending. And maybe, just maybe, being a ghost himself will let him escape some of that, but he knows his younger self will never forgive him.

He decided to do it anyways. To go back, and handle it all as best he can. But today proved that no matter his resolutions, he *can't* handle it, and the instant he's confronted with ghosts he reverts back to useless little Klaus, too stuck in (the mausoleum) his own cowardice to do anything.

"Hey," Five says. "Hey, Klaus, that's okay. It's *okay.* It's not your fault. Anyone would be scared. Fuck, I was *terrified* and I didn't see half of what you did."

Klaus lets out a slightly hysterical giggle. "A+ for effort, bro, but you totally handled that way better than me. You don't have to dress it up."

Five makes a frustrated sound. "Klaus, don't make me stop hugging you to slap you, I hate that."

"And here I thought it was one of your favorite activities - ow!"

"I *warned* you," Five says grumpily, resuming the hug. "Now, listen very carefully: it wasn't your fault you reacted the way you did. You were suddenly confronted with your greatest fear with no warning at a time when you should have been completely safe. You shouldn't expect yourself to be okay, and I'll slap you until you accept that. Understand?"

Klaus gives serious thought to belaboring the point, but that might just prompt Five to finish those equations he claims will allow him to touch Klaus even in incorporeal form. Five can be very obsessive when he wants to be, and if he vows to slap Klaus then he will find a way to slap Klaus even across dimensions.

"Alright, alright." Klaus sighs, and puts his head on Five's shoulder. "So what was her offer? And who was she? And how the fuck did she show up in the apocalypse after eighteen years?"

Which is how Klaus learns about The Commission, a group of time-travelling mass-murderers without proper names who like to be creepy and condescending and invade people's privacy through probably supernatural means.

"There's an entire organization of yous?" Klaus says in bewilderment.

Five smacks him again.

Apparently, the woman is called the Handler, which doesn't sound vaguely dirty at *all,* and she offered them the opportunity to become time-travelling assassins. Five years each, which sounds kind of fishy when there's time travel involved. When they're done, they can retire to whenever they want - but as tempting as the idea of joining in on the original Woodstock is, it seems a lot more likely that they'll just be killed. It's not like anyone would hear from them either way.

"Like they could kill us," Five snorts.

Klaus performs the traditional De-Hubris-ifying Smack, the Glare of Chastisement (Number Eight), and the Please-Don't-Take-Him-Up-On-That,-Universe knock-on-wood.

“Sorry,” Five says.

Getting out of the apocalypse is a plus, because Five’s equations have far too much room for something to go wrong at the moment. It’s also in the negative column, because The Commission’s methods are unknown and untrustworthy and probably rigged to explode if misused. But the opportunity to investigate the organization that will almost certainly oppose their efforts to undo the apocalypse is something that can’t be ignored, and -

“Wait,” Klaus says. He draws back and looks at Five’s face. “Wait, wait, wait. Are you actually going to *accept?*”

“Not if you say no,” Five says immediately. His shoulders are tense under Klaus’ hands. “Not without you. But this is - we *need* to know more about these people. If she’s telling the truth about the apocalypse being ‘meant to happen’, we need to find out what that *means.*”

“So we should kill people?” Klaus says incredulously. “I know we don’t have the most standard view of mortality and morality, Five, but come on!”

“What do you suggest, then?” Five grabs at his hair, a nervous tic he picked up from Klaus. “That we deny her offer, finish my equations, go back and try to prevent the apocalypse - without knowing what they’ll do? Without even knowing what *causes* it, when they probably know every single detail and maybe even engineered some of them?”

Klaus winces at that. It’s an old shame, that he died at the epicenter of the apocalypse and yet doesn’t know a single thing about what caused it. Too high to notice the world ending, his family dying around him. He doesn’t even know if he died before or after them. He’s not sure which is worse.

Five doesn’t bring it up all that often. Klaus knows it chafes at him, not knowing how to save their family, but he’s never actually blamed Klaus for it. Not even when he was newly arrived, desperate to learn why and believing Klaus had the answer.

Their only lead is the prosthetic eye clutched in Luther’s hand. They actually did find the MeriTech building, right here in the city, but of course it had caught fire and none of the records survived. Their first order of business, upon getting back, is Klaus infiltrating MeriTech and getting a look at just who bought that eye. Being a ghost is *very* convenient at times.

Five, however, is right about their plan. It all falls apart if there’s an ambiguously-sized, apocalypse-happy group of people with unclear resources and professional meddling skills trying to interfere. They’re only two people, and they’re even more in the dark than they previously assumed. Going up against The Commission blind isn’t just stupid, it’s *suicidal.*

Klaus gets a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“I -” he says. “I -”

He realizes he’s shaking.

Five pulls him into another hug.

“I’m sorry,” Five says, sounding frustrated and angry and close to tears. “I’m sorry, I can’t think of anything better. I’m so sorry.”

Klaus sucks in a breath, and holds it. He can hold it indefinitely, of course, but he declines to adjust himself so that he can, and instead lets the pressure build up inside his lungs, tighter and tighter until it feels like his chest is going to burst.

Then he lets it go all at once, and the exhale blows back Five’s hair so hard it looks like he’s been standing in a windstorm. Klaus closes his eyes.

“Delores?” he hears himself say. “You’ve been pretty quiet. What do you think?”

‘I’m not quite sure it matters,’ she says, after a moment.

Klaus looks at her. “What? Of course it matters.”

Five looks up as well, frowning. “Delores?”

‘We’ve discussed this before,’ Delores says slowly. *‘No matter when you end up travelling back, I’ll be there waiting. And if you take this offer, I’ll be left behind - which is alright, so don’t apologize again - while you go do what the Handler wants you to, and then I’ll still be waiting for you when you travel home. Either way, whatever happens to me is the same. It’s your two’s journey that will be affected, and I’m not sure I have the right to weigh in on that.’*

“Delores,” Five says, “Of course your opinion is valuable to us. Even if you aren’t affected, we still want to hear what you have to say.”

Klaus nods. “Yeah, what he said.”

‘Well,’ she says, with some hesitation. *‘In that case….I think you should take the offer. Five is right about needing to learn more, and you might never get another chance like this again.*

Klaus flinches.

‘I’m sorry, Klaus,’ she says. He knows she means it, which is a step up from most other ‘sorry’s he’s heard in his life.

“Everyone’s saying that,” Klaus laughs a little, wildly, and buries his head in Five’s shoulder.

Five’s hand snakes around to grasp the back of his shirt. Five hugs him tightly. “I’m sorry, Klaus,” he says, muffled by how his own face is in Klaus’ shoulder.

“Yeah,” Klaus says. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

....Writing EmotionallyAwareAndSupportive!Five is weird, guys.

Chapter 3

The Handler arrives precisely twenty-four hours after she left. Five note the subtle differences in her appearance and concludes she probably experienced some interim of time herself, although he doesn't know how much or what she did during it.

She glances at their joined hands, but Five really doesn't give a flying fuck what this woman thinks. Klaus' grip is tight, and Five can feel the minute tremors that he's trying to suppress. His eyes flick around the landscape at seemingly empty spots, and Five wonders how many ghosts he's seeing.

"Well," The Handler says, and makes an elegant gesture with her hand. "Here I am. What do you say? Yes or no?"

Five takes a deep breath.

"We accept," Five says. "Five years. But we'll only work together. No separating us."

The Handler cocks her head. Five doesn't know why she would bother faking surprise. If The Commission has been observing them, even cursorily, they should know about the truly absurd levels of codependency Five and Klaus have cultivated over the years. Like fuck would they agree to be separated.

Five stares her down, daring her to object.

"Alright," The Handler says at last. She crosses her arms and looks at Five with cool, assessing eyes. "We can do that. Welcome to The Commission, boys."

Klaus shivers, slightly. His eyes are glazed, but Five is fairly sure he's still following the conversation. For now, anyways.

Five feels like shivering himself, but he represses the urge. No matter what, he can't show weakness. Unless the Handler is blind, she can't miss the way Klaus is intensely, uniquely vulnerable around her. The way he'll be vulnerable around every one of their new 'colleagues', until he manages to adjust. Five has to be the strong one, has to be strong enough to protect himself *and* Klaus, strong enough that no one even dares think of trying to hurt either one of them.

Because this was his idea. He's the one who pushed for them to accept, the one who convinced Klaus to say yes, and if anything happens to Klaus because of it that's on *him.* Five hasn't really been the one taking care of Klaus for the past eighteen years - honestly, it's mostly been the other way around - but now that the need has arose he is absolutely *not* going to fail. The very thought is unacceptable.

"Glad to join," Five smiles, and tastes blood.

****

Five has known for a while now that even once he goes home, he probably won't ever leave the apocalypse.

It makes sense. Five is thirty-one years old, and he's spent the majority of his life in the wrecked wasteland that used to be called Earth. Longer than he ever spent at the Academy, longer than anything else he's ever known. His entire life revolves around the apocalypse - surviving it, leaving it, preventing it. Sometimes it feels like it's always been there, nestled inside him as a child, curled around his bones, clogging his throat before he ever even saw it.

It's left it's marks on him. His arm is the most obvious, along with the other scars he got on that fateful day. But there are also other marks. The way his left knee aches a bit when it rains, after that time he twisted it six years ago. The scar on his hip, from the time he slipped opening a can and cut himself on the sharp edge. The slight, almost unnoticeable spray of powder burn just off his left eye, when he foolishly tried to fire a gun he didn't fully know how to work.

He carries those scars with him, cuts and breaks and burns, things that proudly declare *I survived, I survived, do your worst, you haven't killed me yet.* The apocalypse has thrown everything it has at Number Five Hargreeves, and he's still here. They're locked in battle, a stalemate that hasn't yet been broken, swiping at each other with chalk and blood in equal measure. He wonders, sometimes, whether he'll ever really leave it, because even if he stops it from coming to pass he can't imagine himself separate from it. Not anymore.

On the good days, he thinks that if Klaus stays with him, he might be able to let it go. Someday. Klaus certainly won't stop until he does, and Five loves his brother so, so much for that. Of the two of them, Klaus is the one who never lost sight of the fact that there will be an 'after'. Or - well, maybe he has, once or twice, but he never let Five see it, because Five's strength is drawn from his brother's and he doesn't know what he would do if that failed. He doesn't know what to do now that it's reversed, either, but he'll figure it out.

Klaus always spoke about 'after'. After they stop it. After their family is alright. After they save the world. Even on the bad days, when Five can't remember the meaning of the numbers he just wrote and his siblings' graves loom so, so tall, Five loves listening to Klaus' ideas for 'after'. They're like a far-off fairytale, and even when they know they can't fix everything it sometimes seems like they can when he talks that way. Five asks him to talk about it, sometimes, when the world presses down on him and all he can taste is dust and blood, and all he can see is ash falling from the sky.

Five might be able to leave the apocalypse, someday, but he knows the apocalypse will never leave him.

So when the Handler touches his and Klaus' joined hands, and they are suddenly somewhere else, all Five does is look around.

His first impression is *green.* Plants have certainly made their return after the apocalypse, but they're wild and untamed by human hands, sprawling across the ground with no regard for what kind of picture they make. This place, Five instantly knows, probably had an entire committee dedicated to what kind of picture it should make. The lawn is aggressively

trimmed, vibrantly green, and dotted with evenly-spaced trees. There are thin strips of garden lining the building in front of them, healthy and well-tended.

The building itself is one of the most alien things Five has ever seen. He stares at it for a moment, before realizing it's because it's standing tall and strong, windows unbroken, walls straight, all right angles and uncracked stone. Klaus has told him that there are still buildings that haven't fallen, over in Europe and parts of South America, but Five hasn't seen them. The one standing in front of him is the first intact structure Five has seen in eighteen years.

"Here it is," the Handler says. "The Commission." She looks over at Five. "Not Headquarters, of course. This is where most of our operatives stay on their downtime, along with our main training facility. We'll need to get you cleaned up, and assess your skills."

"Of course," Five parrots. He squeezes Klaus' hand. Worryingly, Klaus doesn't respond in kind. He's standing, still as a statue, staring dead ahead with a completely blank face.

He moves when Five tugs on his hand to follow the Handler inside, but it's an automatic reaction, and he doesn't seem to be aware of his surroundings. Or, rather, he's all too aware of his surroundings, and the inhabitants thereof, and they aren't leaving him any room to be aware of anything else. Five beats back the sting in his eyes and tries not to think about how it feels like he's lost both Delores *and* Klaus.

It's only temporary. It has to be.

They trail after the Handler as she walks through the halls. As they pass by the rooms, Five catches glimpses of other people. He forces himself to stay calm and not turn his head around like it's on a swivel, trying to take in the sight of *actual living people* from the corners of his eyes, assessing everyone as a threat. His instincts don't know what to do, going haywire like he's playing Ghost Tag, except so much worse because none of these people are his brother and he has no idea what they'll do.

There are a few people in the halls as well, and Five nearly stumbles flat on his face when one *brushes against his side,* and he barely hears the distracted apology sent his way as they sweep by. Five jerks himself back upright and ignores the lingering feel of their brief contact, like splinters under his skin.

Five tries to pay attention to everything, but it's all so *much,* far more than he's had to process for so long, and he wonders how he managed to do this before he came to the apocalypse. Surely he must have had difficulty parsing through all the stimuli being thrown at him, all the movement and sounds and smells and sensations. He can't believe he was ever functional as a child.

There's too much noise, and light, and so many *people.* Five grips his brother's hand, and he's not sure anymore whether it's meant to be a comfort for Klaus or for himself.

They wind through the halls, the Handler leading the way and Five following, trying not to imitate his brother by slipping into a mostly-catatonic state. It's very tempting. But Five holds on by the skin of his teeth, and when they reach a door and stop he doesn't even care what's behind it, so long as it isn't *people.*

“This is where I drop you off,” the Handler says, smiling. Five wonders if she ever stops. “You’ll stay here for the duration of your training period. There’s a change of clothes and an attached bathroom inside. You have the rest of the day to get situated, and tomorrow you’ll be assigned a trainer.”

Five nods. He’s not certain when he lost the power of speech, but he hopes it returns by tomorrow. That would be a *wonderful* start to his career in assassination, going mute on the first day.

The Handler tilts her head a little, and maintains that small smile, devoid of any hint of warmth. “Good luck, boys,” she says, and walks off down the hall.

Five looks at the door. Klaus’ hand is room-temperature, a side effect of being dead, so Five knows that the sweat-slick heat he feels is entirely his own. The prosthetic eye, their key to the apocalypse, lies heavy in his pocket.

He reaches out their grasped hands to the door, and manages to turn the knob without letting go. The door swings open.

The room is what Five vaguely remembers a motel room might look like. There is a single queen bed, a nightstand next to it, a table and a few chairs, an empty shelf, a dresser, and a door that presumably leads to the bathroom. On the bed is a pile of neatly folded clothes.

Five pulls Klaus inside, and shuts the door. He’s not stupid enough to think that gives them any privacy - if The Commission has any braincells at all, the entire room is bugged - but it lets him relax, just slightly. There’s no more *people.*

Five looks between the clothes and Klaus, weighing his options. As always, Klaus wins out in the end. He maneuvers them to sit on the edge of the bed, and there is silence for a few minutes.

Running his thumb over Klaus’ knuckles, Five looks at his brother. He’s still blank-faced and unresponsive. Five can’t tell if he knows where they are or what they’re doing, although he suspects Klaus would probably notice if Five tries to take his hand away.

For lack of anything better to do, Five waits.

Eventually, after an hour or so, Klaus stirs. Five’s attention snaps to his face, where he’s blinking slowly. Which is good, because he hasn’t blinked since the Handler appeared. Five doesn’t know *everything* about what Klaus’ ghostly reflexes mean, but he knows enough to be fairly confident that if Klaus is imitating the living then he’s coming back to himself again.

“....Five,” Klaus mumbles.

Five squeezes Klaus’ hand and clears his throat. “I’m here,” he manages, throat scratchy and dry.

Klaus takes several seconds to find Five, and even longer to properly focus on him. His eyes dart to the side every so often, before he pulls them back. Five smiles at him, even though he knows it must be a pretty poor imitation.

“Hey,” Klaus says, after a moment.

Five blinks rapidly. “Hey,” he says.

“So,” Klaus says, eyes skittering around the room. “Guess we’re assassins now.”

“Yeah,” Five says, and tries to convince himself it’s worth it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> I fucking listened to 'I Of The Storm' by Of Monsters And Men when writing this. CRY WITH ME.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The worst part of Klaus' powers have always been the noise.

Screaming, shrieking, screeching *noise,* eternal and unending. Klaus can't remember a single time in his life when anything was silent, when he could let his ears relax and hear the sweet sound of nothing at all. Something he's never told anyone is that before he got into the really good drugs, he seriously considered putting out his eardrums. One of the ghosts that hung around him was a doctor, and he probably would have helped. That guy did *not* respect the Hippocratic Oath.

The drugs helped. They helped a lot, made things all blur together until Klaus could convince himself that there wasn't anything there at all, nothing in the corners of his eyes, nothing catching at his ears, nothing nothing *nothing.*

It never *completely* went away unless he took so much his heart stopped seconds later, and Ben always hated when he did that so he tried not to do it on purpose. But god, he wanted to sometimes, just to get away from all the *fucking noise.* Klaus remembers the first time he heard of the concept of auditory torture, and he laughed and laughed and *laughed* until he cried.

Over the past eighteen years, he's grown used to the silence he chased his whole life, and the one thing he regrets about reverting the apocalypse is that the younger him will never get to experience it. He finds himself luxuriating in it sometimes, as Five grows ever-closer to figuring out his equations, trying to soak it all up as if he can carry it back with him to share with himself. He's tried working out what words he can use to describe it, and keeps failing, because he knows how things were when he was alive and it would be like describing air to a man who's been drowning his whole life.

Now he's drowning again, and it's even worse for knowing just how fucking sweet it is to breathe.

The jumbled mass of ghosts - more than he can ever remember seeing in one place, but then again this *is* a building full of murderers - doesn't produce many words. It's almost like they're feeding off each other, hysteria and rage and fear all crashing against each other until he can barely discern individual voices, much less words. The floors are slick with blood, the air thick with the smell, the taste coating his tongue. Corpses limp and drag themselves along

the halls, stumbling and grasping, trailing after their killers. The walls are streaked with gore, centuries upon centuries of death painting a mural only Klaus can see.

Klaus tries to focus on Five, but it's like searching for one individual bubble of air in the entire fucking ocean. Only Five's hand in his allows him to keep his hold on corporeality, because letting go is unthinkable. Klaus knows, with soul-deep certainty, that if he loses his grip on Five's hand he'll get swept away in the tide and never be able to find reality again.

Five's voice is almost lost amid the turmoil that whirls around Klaus. It's like trying to hear him in the middle of a tornado, and Klaus strains himself to the limit, trying to *focus.*

"....di….hear…..she sai-?.....-ing to….-ing tomorr-....."

Klaus squints at his brother and attempts to decipher whatever he's saying, but soon gives it up as a lost cause.

"I can't hear you," he admits. Hell, he can't even hear himself.

Five's face goes through a complicated series of contortions that Klaus would be able to decipher if he were able to pay attention. Instead, his free hand comes up in a futile attempt to cover his ears. He learned the first time the Handler showed up that he can't block out ghostly sound, though. He used to be able to, at least a little, with loud music. Score one for having a physical body. It's one of only two pros of being alive, but right now Klaus would give every ghost power he has for a CD player and a shot of heroin.

He loses track of Five again, so he jolts in surprise when he feels a tight squeeze on his hand. Klaus looks at Five again, and Five's expression now is - oh, wow, he's really frustrated. Klaus feels a frisson of fear that Five is frustrated with *him,* and his inability to fucking *focus,* but on second inspection it's Five's 'I Have Run Into One Of My Limits And I Am Enraged By It's Existence' expression. Klaus is very familiar with that one.

Five glances at their hands, and - oh, it's a specific instance of that sentiment, the one where he's frustrated about only having one arm. He wants to do something with his hand but it's otherwise occupied.

Klaus should remove his hand, let Five do whatever he needs to do (probably lots of things, they're in the middle of enemy territory and need to get ready and instead Five is using his only hand to keep Klaus calm). He tries to, but the signal refuses to travel down his arm and he doesn't move.

It's so *loud.*

Klaus is pretty sure the only reason he's managing to keep his hold on sanity is Five's hand in his, and the fact that none of the ghosts are actually paying attention to him. They're so wrapped up in themselves they don't even notice him, and it's the one single silver lining he can see. If just one of them started to call his name….

After a moment, Five moves his hand. Klaus flinches, but Five doesn't try to pull away. Instead, he wriggles his hand a bit until he pokes out a finger, and reaches out for Klaus' free

arm. Klaus watches with maybe 30% of his attention.

Five pokes at Klaus' other arm, and then he's moving his finger, and - oh.

T-R-A-I-N-I-N-G--T-O-M-O-R-R-O-W--S-E-T-T-L-E--I-N--N-O-W.

Klaus squints at Five's finger, tracing out letters on his skin. The touch is grounding, and he only misses a few of them. He feels suddenly, ridiculously happy for no reason he can discern.

"Okay," he nods. "Sounds good."

Five chews on his lip, and looks uncertain. It's an unfamiliar look on him, even if Klaus is almost certainly the person who has seen it more times than anyone else.

B-A-D-?

There's an obstruction in Klaus' throat, which is stupid because he hasn't consumed anything in eighteen years.

"Yeah," Klaus says, swallowing. "It's - it's so *loud.*"

Five grips his hand tighter.

Klaus closes his eyes, but that doesn't help. In fact, it just means that all he can focus on now is the noise, crashing and rising and swelling and -

Klaus opens his eyes.

He can't actually remember the first time he took drugs. He supposes he must have gotten injured or sick or something, and been given painkillers, and been amazed at the effects on his powers. Because he can't remember a single time in his life when he didn't know that *there was a way out.* Everything was terrifying and gory and so fucking loud, but there was a way to stop it. It was his one salvation.

Drinking alcohol, in retrospect, was unavoidable. Klaus is pretty sure he started around seven or so, but didn't really get into it until after the mausoleum. The alcohol burned his throat and sent him coughing every time, and even if he had easier access to Dad's bar than the random pills he filched from the infirmary it was kind of an acquired taste, and didn't do as good a job as the stronger drugs.

The drugs kept him going. Ben ragged on him about it, but he learned pretty quickly that Klaus would never get clean, and eventually it became more out of habit than anything. Klaus hasn't been fully sober since he was twelve, and he wonders if his siblings ever put together that this was around the time when they all started going out and killing a fuckton of people. He took stuff on and off before that, but once his siblings started gaining entourages of their own, it just got to be too much.

On the streets, it didn't matter so much that he saw dead people. Half the time the people he hung around were one step from dead themselves, and Klaus fit right in. He pumped himself

full of needles and powders and pills, until the dead and the living felt all the same and he couldn't tell if he was one or the other. It wasn't happiness he felt, but for a long, long time it was the closest he got. The closest he could ever get.

Ghosts swirl around him, and for a moment he forgets where he is. Academy or streets or Commission, it makes no difference. He watches blood gush and drip from ragged, gaping wounds, piercing shrieks mingling together in a symphony of death. The sound is more familiar to him than his own name, his own heartbeat, his own self.

Klaus knows he threw away his entire life. What people don't seem to get is that he never really wanted it in the first place.

After some amount of time Klaus couldn't measure even if there was a clock right in front of him, Klaus feels another squeeze on his hand. He looks at Five.

Five moves to trace more letters on Klaus' arm.

S-T-I-L-L--N-E-E-D--H-A-N-D-?

Right. Because no matter how much Five might want to help Klaus (the familiar pang of confusion at someone wanting to *help* him is pushed away in a now-reflexive action), there are still other concerns. For the first time, Klaus notices some folded clothing on the bed, and Five has probably forgotten what it's like to take a shower with running water. He'll also need to sleep at some point, especially if tomorrow is going to be strenuous. And if Klaus can't get used to not taking up Five's single hand, accomplishing those things is going to be a bit difficult.

Klaus wonders, vaguely, what tomorrow's 'training' is going to be like. If it's anything like Dad's training, he might just actually snap and kill everyone, because he is *not* letting Five get subjected to that again. It would make more ghosts, but that's an acceptable sacrifice. Five might get mad at him, but Klaus has gotten pretty good at calming him down by now. And hey, they could always just ransack whatever files are kept in the building and see if there's anything on the apocalypse.

But all of that is stuff to worry about tomorrow. Right now, Klaus needs to let go of Five's hand.

Slowly, he shakes his head. And with careful, infinestimal movements, he pulls his hand out of Five's.

Instantly, he feels like a piece of flotsam ripped away from the only safe land and flung into a typhoon. Klaus shudders and grips his own arms in a futile effort to remind himself of where he begins and where he ends, but he's not so sure it works. The room is spinning crazily, and Klaus is reminded of that mystery pill he took once that got his inner ear doing jumping jacks and eventually made him throw up.

Five is - Five is somewhere close to him, Klaus knows that, but he's not quite sure of the exact location. The only thing he knows is the ghosts, the only real thing in the world, always there, always, the past eighteen years nothing but a dream -

Klaus feels a hand on his arm.

He tilts his head to look at it, and follows it back to its owner. Five.

His brother is intent, laser-focused only on Klaus. Being the recipient of that much focus isn't anything new for Klaus, the lightning rod for the dead, but Five is the only person he's ever felt okay seeing with that look. It's a learned reaction, and it took a long time, but Klaus feels *safe* because he knows his brother would never, ever want to hurt him.

Five's fingers trace out letters.

I--A-M--H-E-R-E--W-I-L-L--N-O-T--L-E-A-V-E--Y-O-U--P-R-O-M-I-S-E

Klaus swallows. Then again.

"I know," he says. "I know. Thanks."

Five pulls back his hand slowly, looking at Klaus questioningly. Klaus almost twitches when the touch leaves, but holds it back. He breathes in, carefully. Breathes out. He nods.

Five nods back, and turns to his new clothes.

Klaus keeps breathing. In, out. In, out.

The noise continues.

Chapter End Notes

See chapter 2 of 'it comes and goes' for why Klaus can't remember his first time taking drugs in this 'verse.

(The doctor who didn't respect the Hippocratic Oath is a reference to ObliqueOptimism's lovely Deaf!Klaus verse, y'all should go read that if you haven't already.)

ARE YOU CRYING YET.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next several weeks are….fraught.

The morning after their arrival, they are collected by a short Asian woman with severe features and lean, coiled muscles crafted through years of work. From the way Klaus twitches around her, she has quite the entourage.

She introduces herself as the Trainer. Five wonders if he'll receive a fantastically uncreative code name like everyone else around here, or if his current name fits the bill already. He rejected having a normal name like his siblings because he *wasn't* normal, and he couldn't let himself forget that. He doesn't mind that his siblings received comfort from their names, is happy they liked them, even (one of his most cherished memories is of the week after they got their names, when they all ran around the house greeting each other just to hear them). But he never saw the appeal for himself. Even the thought of getting a code name is a bit weird, although he won't protest if The Commission does so. That's nowhere near his threshold for picking a fight with them.

If anyone tries to call Klaus Number Four, though, all bets are off.

The Trainer takes them to a gym and has them do a physical assessment. Fortunately, Klaus can pull himself together to stay focused on the Trainer and the tests for the whole time, mimicking Five, although Five has to trace out instructions on his arm for anything complicated. He does it quickly and discreetly, as opposed to the careful way of last night, because the last thing they need is The Commission deciding Klaus is weighing him down.

Five decides that he'll ask if there's any way he can learn sign language, although hopefully once they get away from the building full of murderers Klaus will be able to hear him again. Hopefully Klaus can learn to block out the constant noise. Hopefully Five hasn't condemned his brother to an even worse hell than he thought.

The physical assessment takes up an entire day, which is honestly impressive. Even Reginald's tests weren't that exhaustive. Naturally, Klaus does better than him in nearly every category, even with his handicap. There's a reason Five made him do all the heavy lifting in the apocalypse. When he draws on his ghostly energy to let himself do superhuman feats there's a shimmer of blue light around him, and the Trainer makes a note on a clipboard. Five eyes it warily, but he can't justify getting closer to read it when he's busy lifting weights.

They eat in a small cafeteria - or, they're supposed to, but Klaus completely shuts down when they go near it. Five has to go in, take as much food as he can as quickly as possible, and escort Klaus back to their room while he stares blankly ahead. Five figures he got enough food to last himself a couple days, if he rations right. He isn't so much a fan of sitting with the several dozen people inside the cafeteria, anyways. They stare in the halls, when Five is leading Klaus around, but a few well-placed glares redirects their attention.

After the Trainer releases them for the day, they go back to their room, and Five holds Klaus as he shakes and stares at nothing. Five falls asleep that way, and even if he has a crick in his neck when he wakes up Klaus at least doesn't look like he'd gladly die all over again if he could. Five would break his own damn bones to never see a hint of that look again.

After that, their training begins in earnest.

It's funny (in a way that's not actually funny at all) how their childhood training comes back to them. It's been almost two decades for Five, even longer for Klaus, and yet they find themselves flying through the lessons and tests like they're back at the Academy and Reginald is staring them down in stern disappointment. The Trainer does a decent impression of him, and Five vacillates between feeling that old, familiar brush of inadequacy and an equally familiar urge to jump over and stab the source.

They learn to strip, clean and fire several different models of guns and rifles (Five prefers the smaller ones, but he has to admit that with his power, sniper rifles are probably more practical). They learn learn hand-to-hand combat (re-learn, really, which shortens their training significantly and gets the first slight nod of approval from the Trainer). They learn the tricks of blending in with the populace of whichever time period they end up in (for that one, Klaus just looks nonplussed and stops being visible. The Trainer thinks it over for awhile, before giving him a passing mark). They learn how to work a Briefcase, which is a ridiculous design for a time machine, but okay (Five is deeply confused and extremely jealous to find that there exists a *portable* time machine that works with perfect reliability, when he's been working on a single jump for eighteen years and isn't anywhere close to that level of precision). They're given a handbook and expected to study it in their off-time (Five is just. Going to ignore the section on torture. Klaus gets fairly ridiculous scores in reconnaissance and information-gathering, and it's not like torture is even particularly *reliable*). Five never lets the pouch with the eye leave his person, and never lets Klaus out of his sight.

Klaus improves, somewhat. His hearing is still pretty much shot, but he becomes more aware of his surroundings, and the people that populate them. He can mostly distinguish the living from the dead, although there are a few slip-ups with some of the more normal-looking ghosts.

They develop a system of silent signals for quick communication. The majority of it is conveyed through facial expression rather than hand movements, because Five really does need his hand free in the field. It's very difficult to convey entire tactical battle plans through facial expression alone, so their rudimentary language often makes Five look like he's unsuccessfully trying to hold in a sneeze. But hey, it gets the message across *and* occasionally makes Klaus laugh. Hardly the worst outcome.

Eventually, Five has to venture back to the cafeteria. He's not used to eating *perishable food,* and takes as little of that as possible. There aren't many options for nonperishable or even long-lasting food, which is a criminal oversight, but Five is used to having to make do. He ignores the few people who approach him and try to initiate conversation. Even if he wanted to talk to other people (and he really, really doesn't), he has no idea how. He's only had two conversational partners for more than half his life, and one of them was a mannequin.

Five learns that there is an occupant of the room across from theirs, but their sole interaction leaves the man with two broken thumbs for a remark on Klaus' choice of a skirt. After that, they do not speak, and the man scurries away whenever he and Five are within eyesight of each other. Five gets a reprimand from the Trainer for the incident, but he doesn't particularly care.

Both of their training regimens are irregular, the Trainer tells them, because of their powers. There are enhanced employees in The Commission, but usually it's done artificially through Commission-approved-and-performed means. Five and Klaus are unusual, and Five hopes that also translates to *valuable.*

Five has grown into fantastic precision with his spatial leaps, with three times the stamina he had as a child. He can jump continually for nearly ten minutes, and his cooldown period plateaus around seven minutes. Playing Ghost Tag twice a week for eleven years has turned out to be a wise investment, because he completes the mock assignments they're given so quickly he utterly demolishes several Commission records. He actually breaks the Trainer's stoic exterior when she stares at the stopwatch for several seconds in stunned disbelief.

Klaus falls into more of a supporting role, and he pulls it off with aplomb. It's easy to collect information when you can go invisible and walk through walls, and more than once he pulls out that oh-so-handy superstrength to lend Five some help in a fight. His situational awareness is absolutely terrible, but he can make up for it by making everyone else completely unaware of him.

They're pitted against several other assassins-in-training in simulations and one-on-one fights. Then they move up to facing actual assassins. Ones who, if Klaus is accurate, have been working for years. They don't win every time, but they do win most of the time. A large part of that is thanks to their powers, but Five has always been a big fan of using every tool at his disposal. He maybe injures people a bit excessively whenever they target Klaus, which is self-indulgent of him because they can't actually hurt his brother, but it makes him feel a little less shitty for bringing Klaus here.

Besides, the one time Five gets his arm dislocated, Klaus very calmly grabs a knife and *glows* blue, and the offender gets several very important tendons slashed. Fifteen years of studying anatomy plus superhuman precision is terrifying to behold. Afterwards, Klaus sets Five's arm while acting like the screaming mess on the floor isn't even there. The Trainer looks long-suffering, and the man's partner looks ready to piss himself.

Five rolls his eyes at Klaus, but not very hard, because it's….nice, to feel like the protected little brother again. Just for a bit.

Five doesn't talk to anyone unless he absolutely has to. Klaus never talks to anyone besides Five. This seems perfectly satisfactory to everyone else in the building, presumably because their neighbor and opponents went around explaining the state of their injuries. They're given a wide berth after all of that, and Five notices more than a few wary eyes on his back when he goes to the cafeteria to restock, along with a lot of whispering. It always stops whenever he glances over.

Please. As if he cares about their petty gossip. As long as they leave him and Klaus alone, he doesn't give a damn.

The Trainer, for all her enraging similarity to Reginald, is actually good at her job. She notes down where Five needs to improve and focuses on that the next day, she directs more than a few usages of Klaus' power, she doesn't give praise but she doesn't disparage them when they fall short, and as a result they do that less and less often. For all that he would kill her without giving it a second thought, Five finds himself grudgingly developing a small level of respect for her.

Nearly four weeks after their arrival to the facility, the Trainer sets down her clipboard and looks at them at the end of the day.

"You're ready," she says. "I'll submit the go-ahead tonight, and you'll receive your first assignment sometime in the next few days. You have access to the rest of the Facility until then, I suggest you take the time to relax. I'm sure you'll do The Commission proud."

She leaves the room, and Five conveys this all to Klaus.

"Oh," Klaus says. "Well. I'm all for getting out of here, yay."

Unspoken is the part where he isn't quite ready to kill someone yet, but honestly they both know he'll probably never be okay with that. Five was flabbergasted when Klaus first confessed he'd never actually killed anyone, but in retrospect it makes sense. He was always relegated to lookout on missions, neither his powers nor physical ability very helpful in combat, so it was relatively easy to avoid killing anyone as a teen. His time on the streets was considerably sketchier, and Five doesn't like thinking about the part where Klaus took unnecessary punishment to avoid killing. But he can accept that the fear of being haunted by someone specifically mad at him, as opposed to the more general anger of all the other ghosts, was a large enough deterrent to stay his hand even at the price of getting hurt more.

Now, though, that's going to change. They already agreed that Five will be the one to do the actual killing (he insisted, because honestly there's a small part of him that's ever-so-slightly *proud* of Klaus for never gaining a bodycount, and he wants to preserve that), but in the long run they know it's semantics. The ghosts will still follow Five around, and Klaus isn't going anywhere, so it's not like he'll be able to avoid them.

Five gives his brother a wan smile, and they go back to their room.

They get their pictures taken the next day, for official records, and Five gets a tracker implanted in his arm. The doctor who does so gives Klaus a dirty look, presumably because it wouldn't work on him. Klaus doesn't pay him any attention, watching the procedure intently. Five knows he's making note of exactly where the tracker is, because there's the unspoken knowledge that he'll be the one taking it out when they decide to defect.

They also receive their code names. Well, Klaus does - it seems Five's suspicions were right about his own name being sufficient. However, he balks at seeing Klaus' new handle.

"Raithe?" Five says, looking at the notification. "Please tell me they're joking."

Klaus peeks over his shoulder. “Huh,” he says. “Well, at least it’s cool.”

[They are literally calling you 'ghost'.] Five says in their invented language.

“I *am* a ghost,” Klaus points out.

[They don't have to rub it in!]

Nevertheless, Klaus’ code name remains the same. At least Klaus thinks it’s funny. It’s the only reason Five doesn’t march up to whoever is in charge and demand it be changed. That’s probably for the best.

They mostly hole up in their room for the next two days, talking in half-sentences and code about future plans, and even then only obliquely. They’re well used to having to stay inside for long periods of time (winter in the apocalypse is both unremittingly dangerous and unremittingly dull), so it’s hardly difficult, even if Five gets weird looks when he ventures out for food once.

And then they get their first assignment.

Chapter End Notes

I agonized for so long over Klaus’ code name, it’s ridiculous. Please tell me it’s not stupid.

Also, if you want a spot of humor: guess what everyone else in the building thinks is going on with ‘those two guys who never talk to anyone and go ballistic whenever the other is insulted/injured and are nearly always touching and spend 95% of their time in their one-bed room.’ Go on. Guess.

Chapter 6

The noise is constant and relentless and neverending, which means that however horrible it is, he adjusts. He still can't hear anything (a few snippets here and there, nothing worth trying to decipher), but he gets *used* to it. It's like putting on an old coat that no longer fits, cramming himself into a shed skin. Uncomfortable and awkward and definitely not ideal, but he remembers how to act, how to ignore, how to push it deep, deep, deep.

He can function. Not without a lot of help from Five, but he can.

Their first assignment is pushed under their door. Klaus hopes that's not standard procedure, because if it is he wonders how many times they get stepped on and overlooked. There's less detail than he's expecting, just a date, a name, a photo and an order to terminate.

Klaus wonders if saying 'terminate' lets The Commission tell themselves they're not just murderers. That they have a higher purpose, so they don't do anything so deplorable as to *kill* people. Just 'terminate'. For the greater good.

It's a familiar line of reasoning. Dear old Dad would get along well with them, he thinks.

On their way to the departure room, they get a few furtive glances in the hallways, but no one dares attract their attention. Klaus is pretty sure that most of the people in the building think he and Five are screwing. He can recognize the look on people's faces - silent judgement, concealed curiosity, perverted fascination. Klaus is pretty familiar with those kinds of looks. And honestly, they're sharing a one-bed room they spend 95% of their free time in and constantly hold hands and get extremely violent whenever the other is targeted. Even *if* people know they're brothers, it's probably a minor detail by this point.

They reach the departure room. It's a fairly small room, and the only thing in it is a stack of cubbyholes. One of them has a Briefcase inside it, with a tag on the handle that reads *'Number Five & Raithe'* in neat typewriter font. The Commission really likes typewriters, for some reason. Klaus has no idea why.

"Why did they put *your* name first?" Klaus says, pouting. He wasn't really looking forward to getting a code name, because it felt uncomfortably like discarding his own name and going back to 'Number Four', but he has to admit that 'Raithe' has grown on him. It makes him sound like an ultra-cool international spy character. Which, well, he sort of is now, although he knows Five would heavily debate the 'cool' part.

Five smirks at him. [I'm more handsome,] he says, reaching out and taking the Briefcase from the cubbyhole.

Klaus squawks in offense. "You are *not!* I picked out all your clothes and cut your hair and you *still* looked like a hobo, *I* have never looked anything short of *majestic.*"

That gets a raised eyebrow, and okay, Klaus can remember a few times where he frankly looked not so much better than the corpses that surround them. But that was before the

apocalypse, and Klaus has had an unlimited wardrobe and makeup budget for the past eighteen years and *he has taken advantage.*

He sticks his tongue out at Five. Five rolls his eyes and gives him a gesture they didn't put in their language, but is fairly recognizable nonetheless. Klaus returns it, and they have a brief, nonverbal argument consisting mostly of increasingly childish insults. It only ends when Five reminds Klaus that they really should be going now.

Klaus stills, at that.

Five turns his attention to the Briefcase. He checks the safety and opens it. He looks at the assignment note again, and puts in the date. He closes the Briefcase, and disengages the safety.

[Ready?] Five asks.

Klaus' mouth is dry all of a sudden. He swallows, and smiles wanly at Five. He can't seem to speak for some reason, so instead he just places a hand on Five's shoulder.

Five takes a deep breath, and - they go.

The first thing he notices is the quiet.

It's not *actually* quiet, of course. There is still screaming and moaning and crying. Still ghosts anywhere he looks, woven in between the living. Still constant noise.

But there's *so much less of it.*

Klaus sucks in a startled breath, and he can *hear* himself doing so. He stares around in astonishment, drinking in the sight of his surroundings. Somewhere in a city, maybe a residential district. Those look like apartments buildings, anyways. There aren't more than three dozen ghosts that he can see, and slightly less than half of them are making any kind of real fuss.

"Klaus?"

His eyes snap to Five, who's looking concerned and tense. Klaus stares at him, replaying the sound in his mind. He *heard* that.

[Klaus, are you okay?] Five asks silently.

"I can hear you," Klaus says, dazedly. "Five, I heard you."

That seems to knock the breath out of Five. They stare at each other for a moment - before Five's expression crumples and he all but tackles Klaus in a hug, Briefcase falling to the ground. Klaus catches him and laughs, delight bubbling up inside him.

"I hoped," Five says shakily into his shoulder, muffled by the obstruction but Klaus *can still hear him,* holy *shit,* "I hoped, but I didn't know. I'm so glad, I love you."

“Love you too, bro,” Klaus says, giggling. Holy fuck, it’s so much quieter. It doesn’t hold a candle to the apocalypse, but Klaus doesn’t even care, he can *hear* again.

They stand there long enough that passerbys start giving them weird looks. It’s only when one guy gets a look on his face that indicates he’s going to take issue with two men hugging that Klaus disentangles himself from Five and they escape down an alleyway. Klaus picks up the Briefcase so that they can hold hands, and he can’t forget that they’re here to kill someone, he can’t, but that’s later and this is now, and right now he can *hear* again.

****

Their target is one Sandra Keller, in the year 1931. She has dark hair and lightish eyes, although the photo is black and white so it’s hard to tell, and it looks like she was cropped out of a larger photo. She looks happy.

Klaus has no idea why Sandra Keller has to die. He has no clue what her death will accomplish, what mysterious event will be put back on track with her gone. Making those decisions is above their paygrade, apparently. There are people specifically trained to judge why a person should die, and it’s not them. They’re just told who to kill, and when, and where. Asking questions is a very big no-no, for foot grunts like them.

Klaus *really* thinks The Commission would get along with Reginald.

They take a couple hours to decompress in the tiny hotel room prepared for them. Klaus goes invisible and Five checks in alone, just a businessman staying in town overnight. Nothing unusual here, nosiree. The desk clerk stares a little at Five’s arm, but flushes and averts her eyes when he gives her a cool look.

There are three ghosts in the room with them, but only one is being a nuisance, so it’s practically deserted. Klaus takes a moment to *breathe* for the first time in a month.

A while later, they’re sitting on the bed, Klaus’ head on Five’s shoulder, when Five reluctantly says, “We should start planning.”

Klaus sighs, but straightens up. He looks at Five.

Five picks up the assignment notification from the nightstand. “We have two days,” he says, tapping the code on the bottom indicating their expected timeframe. “So we should dedicate tomorrow to recon and the next to the actual assassination. We’ll see if we can’t make it look like an accident.”

Klaus nods mutely. It’s the best idea they could come up with to prevent ghosts from attaching themselves to Five. If people didn’t know they were murdered, they wouldn’t follow their murderer around. Perfectly simple in theory, but theory often failed them, so Klaus wasn’t all that confident about their chances. But he hoped anyways.

“Do we know *anything* about her?” Klaus says, peering at the paper. “Like - is she some politician’s wife, or an activist, or something?”

“The name isn’t familiar,” Five says. “And I somehow doubt we’d get a very important job for our first assignment.”

“Right,” Klaus says. “So I guess I can look up all the Sandra Kellers in - wherever we are - and go check them out. You know, this would be a lot easier if they gave us more information. Why don’t they do that?”

“I assume only Management knows the answer to that,” Five says. “Sounds like a good plan, but maybe we should split the list? I can be subtle.”

“You’re a one-armed dude in a business suit with no idea how to interact with people who aren’t me,” Klaus says.

“....Fine,” Five says, when he really can’t protest any part of that assertion. “I’ll think of various scenarios to engineer. And inspect the gun, I guess.” He looks over to the package that was waiting for him at the hotel desk.

“Alright,” Klaus sighs. “....You should get some sleep.”

Five makes a face at him, but nods reluctantly. Twenty minutes later, he’s fast asleep.

Klaus absentmindedly braids a bit of Five’s hair for a bit, before unhappily deciding he shouldn’t procrastinate any longer. He leaves the motel and starts looking for - phone books? Do they have those yet?

Turns out they do, although it takes some looking. And then Klaus realizes there’s no reason Sandra Keller would have a phone, and has to trudge around until he finds City Hall. There, he finally finds the birth certificates of the thirteen Sandra Kellers currently living in the city. She looks early-to-mid-twenties in the photo, so he cuts out the very old and young ones and ends up with five candidates.

The Post Office, helpfully enough, has all of their addresses on file, along with another two Sandra Kellers Klaus realizes must not have been born in the city. He also realizes that he has no way to match the five candidates he picked to the addresses, and spends a good ten minutes cursing at the fact that he now has to go all over the city looking up every single one until he finds her.

By the time dawn arrives, he’s just coming back from the sixth Sandra Keller’s house, and is in a reasonably grumpy mood. He flips off the sky, debates with himself for a few minutes, and pushes onwards.

He finds the intended target at the eighth place he looks.

Sandra Keller is, apparently, a twenty-nine year old mother of two young boys. Klaus and Five’s picture of her stands on the mantle, and the entire thing is her in a wedding dress next to a suited man who drifts through the apartment, eyes sad and blood dripping from what looks like a mugging gone wrong. She’s a seamstress, and after sending her sons off to school she sits down and works diligently at the pile of clothing waiting to be mended. The sewing machine appears to be the most expensive thing in the apartment.

Klaus watches her for a while.

Then he goes back to the hotel.

Five is awake, which isn't surprising. He's finishing up reassembling the gun when Klaus comes in, and looks up when Klaus rematerializes.

"Found her," Klaus says quietly, and relays his observations.

Five's face doesn't change, remaining still and undisturbed. Anyone with less experience in reading him would think him entirely unaffected.

"Alright," Five says, after a minute. "So there's no danger, and no one with their guard up. It shouldn't be difficult. I'll want to case the place myself, though. What's the address?"

Klaus doesn't answer.

Five looks at him. He reaches out and takes Klaus' hand. "Klaus," he says.

"Yeah," Klaus says, and closes his eyes. "I know."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

Klaus gives him the address.

Chapter 7

Five is entirely, perfectly aware that there is a vast multitude of things wrong with him.

There's the obvious, like his social incompetence. That one he can't even blame on the apocalypse, he's always been like that. He doesn't really mind that one, most of the time. Navigating the invisible rules of social interaction is annoying and frivolous and almost entirely without value, although he has enough self-awareness to realize that there's a chance he might not think so if he were better at it.

There's his arrogance, which he can admit is occasionally a problem. In that it landed him in the apocalypse, and all that. Klaus keeps an eye on that sort of thing, and applies mild violence whenever Five overreaches himself, so at least he's got that one covered. Although he would like to note, for the record, that his arrogance *can* be a net benefit, re: setting himself to the task of travelling back in time to save the world just because he thinks he can if he tries very hard.

There's the fact that he's been comfortable with violence from a very young age. That one can be entirely blamed on Reginald, although there's a small part of Five that wonders if he's predisposed to some level of sadism, even if only slightly. He enjoys the feeling of being *superior* to someone, and he has to admit that he's the one who played around most with the criminals they fought. It's not a very high-level concern of his - not even a medium-level one, really - but it still exists.

Relatedly, he doesn't see murder as anything *inherently* bad (the idea of an objectively correct moral system is actually hilarious to him, but that's neither here nor there). Everyone dies, and he's never really managed to muster up more than vague wisps of empathy for anyone outside of his siblings. Killing people….he can't say he's never taken *satisfaction* from murder, but he's never *delighted* in it, and that's always been good enough for him. It's probably the flaw he's least bothered by.

Now, though, he's reconsidering. He still doesn't care, but - he's at least somewhat bothered by how much he *isn't* bothered at the thought of killing Sandra Keller.

Five is very familiar with death. He was trained to dole it out for as long as he can remember, and he was *good* at it. For the year or so he was in the field before running away, anyway. And then he came to the apocalypse, and death was a constant, omnipresent companion. Five lived in the gutted corpse of the world, and he's pretty much an expert on death by now.

Except, of course, he can't hold a candle to Klaus.

Klaus' relationship with death is….complicated. He's tried to explain it a couple times, but he can't find the right words, and it quickly became clear that he was working on a few *very* different underlying assumptions. Five knows, theoretically, that there is some form of existence after death, but Klaus is the one single person in the entire *world,* even before the apocalypse, who actually *understands* that, and has for his entire life.

It took a while, but they eventually realized that Klaus just couldn't satisfactorily explain his view of death with mere words. Five suspects, even, that if he worked for decades he might be able to figure out the equations to fully explain whatever dimension Klaus interacts with, and the numbers themselves wouldn't mean anything to Klaus but he would understand the concepts they represent perfectly. It's honestly a little annoying, but also - alien. Five doesn't like thinking about his brother in those terms, but he's come to accept (with ill grace, but accept nonetheless) that there are just some things he won't ever be able to fully understand.

So Five doesn't entirely know what Klaus is thinking when they reach Sandra Keller's apartment. He highly doubts Klaus could describe it himself. His powers always were the ones that most defied explanation.

He knows that Klaus doesn't want to do this. He's not sure of the ratio of morality to selfishness in Klaus' reasons, but it would be incredibly insensitive to ask, so he doesn't. Five isn't sure how to reassure him, either, so the most he can do is place his hand on Klaus' arm.

Klaus absently puts his hand on top of Five's, so at least he isn't making things worse. They stare up at the building for a minute, the sun high in the sky.

"Okay," Five says. "Fourth floor, you said?"

"Yeah."

Five squeezes his brother's arm, and jumps to the alley beside the building. He cranes his head up, and jumps to the fire escape on the fourth floor. Looking through the window shows no one in the room, and he jumps inside.

It's a small bedroom, and the rest of the apartment is equally tiny. There's no one home, and Five gets into the hallway without problems. He keeps careful note of where he is, relative to the apartment. If someone enters his field of vision, he can jump back and not deal with an alarm being raised about the strange one-armed man roaming the hallways.

That ends up happening twice, but years of playing Ghost Tag have honed Five's reflexes to a razor-sharp edge, and he jumps before they notice him. It's not a hardship; the apartments all have the same layout, and he takes the time to explore the empty one to get ideas about what his approach should be.

There are several possible ways to carry out the assassination. He was supplied with a gun, but that's really just to make things easier if he needs one. Five never bothered telling The Commission about his plan to simulate accidents, and he wonders if they gave him a gun just in case, or if they genuinely don't know about his planned methodology. If it's the latter, that implies some interesting things about the extent of their surveillance.

The most straightforward approach would be to push her down some stairs and ensure she lands head-first. If it isn't severe enough, though, he'll have to apply the injury himself, and the less interaction he has with her the better. Five relegates that plan to the back-burner.

Starting a fire is too chancey, and while Five….doesn't precisely *care* about the collateral damage he might accrue, he certainly wants to avoid it. Both because adding more ghosts to

his eventual entourage is something he never wants to inflict on Klaus, and because the thought of doing sloppy enough work that there's collateral damage irks him.

There are a lot of things wrong with him. But that doesn't mean he has to do more wrong things than necessary.

Five lets out a breath, and leans against the wall of the empty apartment.

Perhaps something with electricity. She spends an enormous portion of her day at an electric sewing machine, sabotaging it should be simple enough. He can ask Klaus to look at what model it is, and do research on the circuitry with what remains of the day. Going in at night and fixing things to trigger a fatal shock - she'll be dead by this time tomorrow.

There. Easy. She won't ever even see him.

Five looks around the apartment and commits the layout to memory. Then he clears his throat. "Klaus?"

Klaus materializes a few feet away, hands in his pockets. "Mm?"

Five grew used to that a year into the apocalypse, but now it brings to mind the fact that The Commission almost certainly spied on him in a comparable, if not directly parallel, manner. He feels a pang of anger that grows bigger by the day, and lets it thrum through him before tucking it away. Now is not the time.

"I have a plan -" and he outlines his idea.

Klaus remains impassive, and his face doesn't flicker once Five finishes. "Okay. Sewing machine. Hold on."

He disappears. Five breathes in, and out.

A minute later, Klaus comes back, and relays the sewing machine model Sandra Keller uses. Five doesn't thank him, because he doesn't think Klaus would appreciate it, and simply nods. They leave the same way they came in.

****

It's just as easy as he thought, in the end.

Five researches the sewing machine himself. It doesn't take too long to find a manual, especially when he can teleport. He pores over it for several hours, until he could probably assemble an entire copy from scratch. It's large and bulky and barely portable, which is to be expected from the early thirties, and that means that there's a lot of things that can go wrong. He honestly wonders how nothing has before, this is terrible engineering.

Sneaking in at night is perfectly replicable. Since the owner of the apartment next to the fire escape is sleeping in their bedroom now, he has to be completely silent, but he has experience with that. He has no idea how lightly the Kellers sleep, so sabotaging the sewing machine takes a few hours while he ensures that there's no sound louder than a quiet *clink* here and

there, but no one wakes up. Klaus keeps lookout, flitting between the two tiny bedrooms with a watchful eye.

The next day, they wait until noon, and then Klaus pokes his head in to check.

He comes back with his hands in his pockets and a pensive expression, and Five knows even before he opens his mouth that they succeeded.

Five doesn't feel any different. He doesn't feel bad for Sandra Keller, who by Klaus' account is reuniting with her husband, as much as ghosts can gather enough of themselves to recognize each other. He doesn't feel bad for himself, having committed his first truly morally indefensible murder. He only feels slightly bad for Sandra Keller's sons, who will be the ones to find her body and likely go into the state's abysmal foster care system unless a neighbor takes them in, because he knows what it's like to have your entire world ripped away.

As they return to the hotel room, though, he looks over at Klaus, and tries to find the right words. He isn't sure they exist, isn't even sure of what Klaus is feeling right now, but he's tried ignoring that in the past and *that* went terribly, so he knows they're going to have to talk whether he wants to or not.

But, as always, Klaus is unpredictable, and he speaks first.

"I'm not mad at you," Klaus says. His voice is neutral and steady, and maybe Five would think he's lying in an attempt to keep the peace, but they decided a long time ago to not lie to each other, so Five takes it at face value.

"You're upset, though," Five says. It's obvious, from the set of Klaus' shoulders to the way he stares at the wall without blinking.

Klaus shrugs. "Yeah. Less than I would be if she was following us."

That costs him something to say, Five can tell. He doesn't know how to reply, so he chooses to keep silent. That doesn't mean he can't do anything, though, and he crosses the room to gather Klaus in a hug.

Klaus returns it, which Five was half-worried he wouldn't do. At least that's not broken. As much as Five trusts his brother, he's not sure he'd believe Klaus isn't angry if he refused a hug. Maybe Klaus knows that. His psychicness where Five is concerned has only grown over the years.

"Can I ask something stupid and ridiculous and unfair?" Klaus says eventually. His voice is quiet.

"Of course," Five says.

"Can you promise we won't have to make compromises when we go back? That we can just - fix everything, without doing anything we don't want to do?"

Five is silent for a moment. "I can't promise that."

“I know. Just want to hear it. Please?”

“Okay,” Five says softly. He’s never been able to say no to Klaus when he asks ‘please’. Maybe because it happens so rarely. He closes his eyes and swallows. “We’ll be able to jump back exactly where we want to, very soon, and we’ll get there early enough to make a difference. We’ll know everything about the apocalypse and exactly what to do to prevent it. It won’t be anything horrible or awful, just a few simple things, and we’ll do them without anyone finding out what they are so The Commission has no idea what happened and implodes from confusion. We’ll see our siblings again, and they’ll all be so happy to see us that we can steer them into becoming a family again. And then we’ll live happily ever after.”

Klaus lets out a snort. It sounds a little wet. “You suck at storytelling, you know. Completely unrealistic.”

Five smiles into his shoulder. “...Yeah.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> I'm now up to chapter 13 of 'it comes and goes'! You may give acclaim in the form of comments and/or kudos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forty-eight hours after they arrive in 1931, they receive new orders. Klaus didn't expect anything congratulating them on completing their first mission, and in fact might have burnt the paper then and there if it had, but he wonders what The Commission thinks. All that accompanies their new orders is a notification that their payment has been deposited to their accounts. Klaus honestly has no idea how much they're getting paid, and cares even less. He has no physical needs and a fairly strong distaste for withdrawing any amount of that money, ever.

"Where to now?" he asks Five, sitting on the bed with his knees drawn up. "Or should I say when?"

"1876," Five reads. "Target is one Samuel Freeman. He - hm."

"What?" Klaus says warily.

"There's a note about the preferred method," Five says, frowning. "They want it to look like a *badly covered up* accident."

"Ah," Klaus says.

"A frame-up. Lovely." Five sighs. "We have five days."

Klaus sighs as well, and heaves himself off the bed. He goes to the Briefcase. Carting the thing around all the time isn't really feasible with one person who might need to drop out of corporeality at any moment and another person with only one arm, so they compromised on taking it *near* where they're working and leaving it in places almost inaccessible without teleportation or wall-walking. It's not perfect, but honestly Klaus doesn't care all that much about The Commission's disapproval. They can deal.

"What's the date?" he asks, flipping the safety.

"October 29th."

Klaus sets the dials and closes it. He looks over at Five. "Got everything?"

"I should probably be seen checking out. Hold on."

Gathering their things doesn't take long. Mostly because they're all Five's things, and he basically just has the clothes on his back, and a few toiletries and bits of food. Klaus figures he'll have to ease Five into the concept of readily accessible food that renders hoarding obsolete. Hell, he's not entirely comfortable with the idea. Plus, he keeps having to push away the niggling worry that he doesn't have instant access to a fully-stocked infirmary.

Five manages to act completely normal as he checks out, even answering the clerk's small talk without more than 30% of his exasperation showing. Klaus is so proud of him. His acting skills are still objectively terrible, but as long as the situation doesn't last long he can pass as a perfectly normal and functional human being.

Maybe Klaus can reward him? He doesn't know what kind of stuff they have in 1876. Do they make those blue ribbons yet? Klaus imagines presenting Five with a ribbon that says 'Winner at Being an Actual Person', and giggles.

He's pretty sure Five would act annoyed, but get that tiny twist in his lips that mean he's trying to hold in a laugh. And he'd definitely keep the ribbon, even if he denied it.

Five checks out, and rounds the corner to an alleyway. He looks around furtively, before nodding vaguely three feet left of where Klaus actually is. Klaus pops into existence and puts his hand on Five's shoulder.

Klaus takes one last look at 1931. He wonders if Sandra Keller has been found yet. Probably. Her sons almost certainly came home hours ago. Chances are they're at the police station, waiting on relatives or neighbors or an orphanage to take them in. It's probably already been ruled an accident. Klaus has had experiences with the police, and he doesn't think a ninety-year gap will change the fact that they won't bother investigating a poor working-woman's death if it's obviously an accident. Probably even if it isn't an obvious accident.

(He might be being too harsh. But he really, really doubts it.)

The buildings loom above them, glaring down against the backdrop of the overcast sky. Klaus looks in the direction of Sandra Keller's apartment.

He knows, probably better than anyone, just how utterly *inconsequential* a person's death is to the world at large. Sandra Keller will not be missed by more than a handful of people, maybe even with fingers left over. She will be mourned, yes, but the sun will still rise, the Earth will still turn, and eventually those who remember her will die and she will be forgotten. Any mark she made will be washed away, in time.

Maybe even the one she made on him.

Klaus blinks, and vanishes in a wash of blue.

****

Finding their hotel in 1876 isn't very different from 1931. They (well, Five) check in, receive their weapon, 'unpack', and sit down to brainstorm. Klaus suspects the process will get old very fast. Who knew being a contract killer would be so *monotonous.*

There's only one ghost in the room, sulking by the wall where Klaus suspects her body is buried, so it's positively peaceful. The distant screaming from the next room over is hardly noticeable.

"Giving us five days is a bit generous," Five observes, making himself comfortable on the bed. "I suspect there's something that will slow us down."

"We don't have a picture," Klaus suggests. "It'll be harder to find him."

"That's true…." Five pulls out the paper and frowns at it. "It still smells fishy."

"Oh, definitely," Klaus flumps down next to him, face pressed into the bedspread. "Caution's the word of the day here. That means you, by the way."

"Excuse me, which one of us flooded the entire bunker because he tried to divert the snowmelt without figuring out where it would get diverted *to?*"

"Hey!" Klaus flips over and points accusingly at Five. "You weren't being *any* help, just all 'go ahead and stop bothering me, Klaus, I'm being gooey with Delores'! What was I supposed to do?"

"Ideally, not flood the bunker!"

Klaus sticks out his tongue and flips him a double-bird. The best part is that Five can't actually copy that, so *nyah.*

"Anyway," Klaus continues loftily, ignoring Five's sad little single middle finger. "I was talking about the part where I'm basically invincible, and you're all killable and stuff."

"Do you *want* me to finish those equations?" Five demands. "Because I will. It wouldn't even be hard. I can show you just how 'invincible' you are."

"Maybe later, *mein bruder.* I know my other self will appreciate it," Klaus waggles his eyebrows outrageously.

It takes a second for Five to understand his meaning - aww, he's so *innocent* - and then he blanches and looks ill. That never gets old. Klaus might consider not torturing his brother with the idea that he's going to be fucking himself (and vice versa), if his reactions weren't just so goddamned hilarious.

And if Klaus didn't think about it so much. He hasn't had sex in *eighteen years,* okay, sue him.

"I cannot *wait,*" Klaus sighs dreamily. "After we save the world I'm dragging myself off to a hotel or something and not coming back for two weeks, just so you know. No, wait, sixteen days."

Five twitches and looks at him. "Dare I ask why sixteen?"

"Four times Four, baby," Klaus grins at him.

“Oh, *now* you like math,” Five mutters. Then he twitches again and does that thing where he does a decent job of erasing the last minute or so from his mind, and shakes himself. “Anyway, we should be on the lookout for obstacles. We’ll search together tomorrow.”

“Really?” Klaus tilts his head. “I don’t mind looking tonight. I can see what kind of night life they have in 1876, it’s bound to be *educational.*”

Five takes a few seconds to respond. That’s unusual enough that Klaus looks more closely at him.

“I’d rather you stay here tonight,” Five says, and oh.

He knows Five is asking more out of concern for Klaus than for himself. Five is not a very moral person, and the number of people he truly gives a damn about can fit on precisely six fingers. Of the two of them, Klaus is definitely the one most heavily affected. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a small part of Five that was shaken by today.

And Klaus has spent the past eighteen years being a big brother.

“Alright,” Klaus says. He maneuvers himself until he’s parallel to Five, and then wraps his brother up in a massive, clingy hug.

“Not precisely what I had in mind,” Five says, after a moment. It comes out a bit muffled, on account of his head being shoved into Klaus’ chest.

“Too bad,” Klaus says, perhaps more gleefully than the situation warrants. “You shouldn’t have done this for me when we were at The Commission’s knock-off Academy, now I’m all set to return the favor.”

Five sighs. “I’m not going to get you to let go of me until morning, am I.”

“Not a chance!” Klaus says brightly.

“Ugh.”

But Five doesn’t protest, which took Klaus the better part of a decade to accomplish and will probably net him a sainthood on their return to their original time. Ten minutes later, Five’s breathing evens out into the deeper rhythm of sleep. The ghost in the corner started crying a while ago, but hasn’t said any words yet, so it’s as peaceful as it can get, really.

Klaus shifts a little, and doesn’t bother suppressing a smile when Five’s arm snakes around him to grab a fistful of his shirt. He checks that Five isn’t in a position that will lead to neck pains in the morning, and settles in to wait.

****

The night passes slowly.

All nights pass slowly, really. Klaus has become very good at finding things to fill up the time, but there’s only so much he can do. Granted, it’s very fun to start fires when there’s no

one around to stop them, but even that gets old after a while. Even limiting himself to places they definitely, absolutely cleared of all usable supplies saw him get bored after a few years or so.

There's studying, but no matter how important that is Klaus can only stand so much of it per night. And he's had to branch out to more esoteric fields over the last few years, because fifteen years is more than enough time to quite literally memorize entire textbooks forwards and backwards.

Klaus is pretty sure he qualifies for a doctorate, now. It's a weird feeling. Most of his knowledge is theoretical, and he really hopes it stays that way, but if something happens he's fairly certain he's as competent as he can be in the field of medicine. He did alright with Five's arm, at least.

He's tried making sense of Five's equations once or twice, but that was a bust. Five was patient enough, a couple times, to try explaining a few things, and Klaus can now understand the very, *very* basics of time travel. The other 95%, however, is forever beyond him. Sometimes he went into the workroom anyways, in the dead of night, and traced the numbers that would bring them back to their family.

Mostly, he went outside at night. There was always the neverending quest for supplies, of course, food and water and miscellaneous. At least half his night was dedicated to scouting. He rarely brought things back on his own, because Five got grumpy if he stayed cooped up for more than a couple days, but sometimes (mostly in winter) Klaus restocked the entire pantry before Five woke up.

When he wasn't scouting, though, he liked to just - wander. Through the city. Both his home city and the one they moved to, they were equally as interesting. Klaus could tell where different patches of devastation used to be, like the bridge where he bought cocaine, or the police station he was usually brought in to, or the high-scale neighborhoods he couldn't even go *near,* or that one alley he didn't like to remember. It was almost beautiful, in a way. Everything was brought low in the end, no matter what it was like before.

And it was so, so quiet.

Klaus closes his eyes and tries to remember that quiet. It's a bit difficult, with the ghost in the corner having escalated to sobbing an hour ago and the screaming from the other room being doubled, but he does.

He can't forget the silence. It's all he ever wanted, his entire life, the one thing he could never have (he could never have other things too, he knew, but those he accepted and made himself not want, because why torture himself more than he has to?). The drugs *almost* let him have it, just enough to hope, just enough to hurt, just enough to go crazy with rage and fear and pain because *why can't it be quiet, please, why,* ***why.***

Sometimes he'd stop, in the middle of the city, for no reason he could discern, and stand there. He didn't know why, not until everything went blurry and he'd realize he was crying.

Those were the nights he didn't mind not being able to sleep.

He misses those.

Klaus holds Five, and closes his eyes, and the night passes.

Chapter End Notes

So, I've had a couple people asking about whether I'm going to cover the canon timeline. The answer is YES.

This series is going to end up having four main stories, and this is the third one. I'm currently writing the last one. So far I'm 70,000 words in, and I think there's another 40,000 to go. *(Pray for me.)*

So you all have that to look forward to.

Chapter 9

It takes them just under a day to find Samuel Freeman, and then it becomes apparent why they were given so much time.

Samuel Freeman, it turns out, is a black man who likely clears six and a half feet. He has thick slabs of muscle, and from the way he moves he knows how to use them. That wouldn't be such an advantage against their powers and/or a good sniper rifle, of course, but the issue is that he's constantly surrounded by much more of the same. Tall, well-built black men who look intimidatingly at anyone who so much as glances in his direction, weapons barely hidden under their coats.

The reason behind this is how they manage to track him down in the first place: Samuel Freeman, just eleven years after being freed from slavery, is running for governer of Louisiana. There is, naturally, a bit of pushback against this, so several dozen of his closest friends have formed a bodyguard squad to ensure that he reaches the elections. There's so many factions that want him dead Five doesn't even know which one they're framing.

"So," Five muses, looking down from the top of a church belfry. "We have to not only kill him, but make it look like a badly-covered up assassination by any one of his political enemies. Which means it has to be plausible that someone without teleportation or incorporeality managed to get past a dozen well-armed and paranoid bodyguards, killed him, and got away without a trace."

"About sums it up," Klaus says, off to the left somewhere. He's invisible at the moment, but it's easy enough to make his voice audible. Five vaguely wonders if this is what Klaus felt like when he was alive, talking to Ben. Although, of course, anyone near them could hear Klaus.

Five wonders if Klaus can make himself appear only to select people. It's not something they could ever experiment with in the apocalypse, but he makes a mental note to bring it up later. That could prove to be *very* useful.

Five looks down into the street, where Samuel Freeman is making a speech to a crowd of people. He can't hear what's being said from up here, and if he can't then Klaus certainly can't, but Freeman certainly seems good at making speeches. His arms are waving, and energy is practically sparking off his body. The tone of his voice at least carries, bursting with passion and no small amount of rage.

"This is probably a test," Five comments idly.

He can just picture Klaus turning his head. "Hm?"

"Sandra Keller was definitely a test," Five elaborates. "She was an obvious innocent. Nothing could possibly justify killing her on moral grounds. They wanted to see if we would carry out any kind of job they threw at us, no matter who we had to kill. A test of commitment. This….I think this is a test of our skill."

There's a few seconds of silence before he hears a subdued, "Makes sense."

Five decides to keep his other theory tucked away, the one where it's possible Sandra Keller's death didn't even serve The Commission's needs and she was just chosen at random. He's not going to mention it. It wouldn't help anything, and it's….*probably* not true, anyways.

Voicing it would only hurt Klaus. Five has done that enough for a lifetime.

Leaning against the railing, Five considers their options.

Ironically, the idea of setting a fire comes back to him. It's probably the ideal solution. No one would believe it to be an accident, it couldn't be traced back to anyone in particular, and in the chaos it would be easy enough to ensure Freeman couldn't escape. The only issue would be the part where his wife and two daughters would almost certainly perish with him, and likely several of his guards.

The thought of racking up collateral damage, especially on his *second assignment,* leaves a bad taste in Five's mouth. He isn't sure whether he'll be able to keep it that way over the next five years (ordinarily, he would be much more confident, but this is Klaus' sanity on the line and he can't gamble with that), but he'll damn well do his best.

"We're going to have to get creative," Five sighs, leaning his head against the post nearest to him. "Follow him around for the rest of the day, I'll investigate his home."

"Okay," Klaus says. Five is thankful that there's only a small trace of reluctance in Klaus' voice.

He doesn't want Klaus to become like him. Five is aware of his flaws, and accepts them, and even embraces some, but he wouldn't want Klaus to share any of them. It would be exceptionally cruel of Five to do that, and the thought of slowly chipping away at what makes Klaus *Klaus* is so profoundly horrifying that Five swears to himself that if it starts to happen they're running, damn the consequences.

But neither does he want Klaus to take every job as hard as he took Sandra Keller. No matter Klaus' relationship with death, killing people is *not* something he's mentally equipped for (in so, so many ways, Klaus is a much better person than Five). Except they're going to be killing a lot of people - hundreds, if their allotted times so far are any indication - and he needs to develop some level of remove. He won't survive otherwise.

Five suspects Klaus knows that. Which is why they don't speak about it any further, a comfortable silence falling between them (except it's only silent for him, he knows, and tries not to think about that). A cool wind blows by, ruffling Five's hair.

Down below, Freeman rallies the crowd, unaware of their eyes searching, watching, waiting.

****

They make their move late on the fourth day. Five kept the arson idea in mind, but only as a last resort, and thankfully managed to come up with an alternate plan.

Their chosen ground is the hall where Freeman is running his campaign from. He's only renting a single room of the building (and at a higher price than any of the other people there, Five notes), but the entire place has a built-in kitchen and cafeteria where people can get their meals from. Cafeterias have not ceased to make Five deeply uncomfortable, but he ruthlessly locks the feeling away. Besides, he'll only be going into the kitchen.

Freeman doesn't go down to the cafeteria himself, instead sending one of his men to get food for everybody. However, the men usually get a portion for Freeman separately, out of the unthinking partition between themselves and him. Very unfortunate for Freeman, but good news for Five and Klaus.

Klaus is tasked with causing a distraction. He's vague on what kind of distraction he'll make, and Five trusts his brother but he's still a little worried about what that means. Klaus is not known for his subtlety.

Still, Five has no doubt that all eyes will be drawn. Which is when he'll jump into the kitchen, poison Freeman's portion of food, and jump out with no one the wiser. They'll have to time it carefully, after the chefs have assembled the food but before it's taken away, but Five is confident they can manage.

The poison will act within a couple hours of ingestion, whereupon Freeman will die of what looks like a suspiciously quick and sudden case of food poisoning. There will be traces of poison left in his system, but to put it bluntly none of the coroners in the county will bother looking very deeply into his death (Klaus makes a face when Five puts it like that, and honestly Five agrees, but that doesn't change that it's to their advantage). The dismissal will ferment outrage and unrest amongst the black community, which Five assumes is what The Commission is going for here.

Five is waiting outside the wall of the kitchen, poison tucked inside his jacket, hoping Klaus causes his distraction soon. A one-armed man in a business suit is not very unobtrusive, which Five finds endlessly annoying. He isn't upset about getting a lower score in period-stealth than Klaus, because it's hard to top invisibility, but the score he *did* get is below average. That is a fairly new experience for Five, and he finds he doesn't like it.

The Trainer hinted to him that they could replace his arm, once, but Five firmly shut her down. Like fuck is he trusting anything they're offering, and he's managed perfectly well with one arm for twelve years now. Getting a new one isn't worth it.

Although that doesn't mean he can't privately mourn his stealth score. He is *not used to failure,* okay, he's grown better about it but he is by no means a *graceful* loser.

Five's reminiscences are interrupted by the sound of raised voices. He stills, and if he strains himself he can just make out a few of the words. Something about - smoke?

If Klaus burns down the hall, Five is going to smack him. That was the *back-up* plan, dammit.

But it's obviously the distraction, so Five waits several seconds and then jumps through the wall.

Five knows the layout of the kitchen from last night's recon, so he lands in a corner that is unlikely to have people near it, especially if there's something going on near the front. Sure enough, his arrival is unnoticed. Although there are more people still in the kitchen than he'd like. They're congregated near the door, but it's not a *large* room.

Well, it's not like he's staying more than a few seconds. He scans the tables, and - yes, there's the food set out for Freeman's group.

Or, well, the plates, anyways. There isn't yet food placed on them.

Five curses inside his head. They fucked up the timing, fucking *fuck.*

"Oh my god, it's on fire!" one of the chefs exclaims, and a few of the workers step back in alarm.

Fuck. He needs to get out before someone sees him, but this is their only chance - tomorrow is their last day and Freeman will be staying home with his family, the only option left would be arson -

Five darts forward, scoops up a ladleful of string beans (Freeman's favorite) and plops it onto the smaller plate. He pulls out the poison and sprinkles it over the food.

One of the workers turns -

and Five jumps faster than he ever has before, stumbling over his own feet on the landing, breathing heavily, heart pounding in his chest.

He leans against the wall of the building and strains his ears. If the worker saw him….

But there's no shouting, and what few words he can make out are still about the apparent fire. Five holds his breath to listen until he can't anymore, but there's nothing about an intruder.

"Hey," Klaus says.

Five jumps roughly four feet in the air, and whirls around to face his brother. "*Jesus,* Klaus!"

Klaus' eyebrows go up. "Huh. I haven't surprised you like that in almost eight years. Something happen?"

"Minor complication," Five says, pressing his hand to his heart to calm it. He realizes he's still holding the empty paper packet, and discards it. "I think I took care of it, but you should observe Freeman until he eats the string beans."

"Okay," Klaus says. "Meet back at the hotel?"

Five nods, and they part ways. Five swings by where they stashed the Briefcase and picks it up. The regualtions about the things are really fucking annoying, he's found.

****

Klaus appears an hour later with the news that Freeman ate the string beans, and Five breathes a sigh of relief. So that's their second assignment down perfectly. They just need to do several hundred more, hopefully while finding out about the extent of The Commission's knowledge about the apocalypse, and then they're home free.

They have another day before they're assigned a new job, but neither of them suggest going out. For one, there will probably be quite a lot of unrest tomorrow. For another, 1876 isn't exactly Five's idea of a good time. It's easier to pretend it's winter and he can't leave home - he has plenty of supplies for another few days, and there's one equation he's been working on for a while now that could use some attention.

Klaus is subdued again. Five hugs him, but can't really think of what to say. Unhappily, he thinks of the several people back home who have made it onto his kill list, thanks to Klaus dropping little anecdotes about his time on the streets (fucking *Carlos* holds the current number-one spot, just for the way Klaus clammed up after mentioning the name once). At this rate, Five worries his brother won't be happy with all of them dying in mysterious yet painful accidents once the apocalypse is averted.

Well. They have a few more years for Five to bring him around. Five squeezes Klaus again and says he loves him, and gets the expected response. At least he has that.

They sit in comfortable silence for some time, Five scribbling in a cheap notebook and Klaus babbling away about something inane. It's a familiar scene, and Five can almost lull himself into thinking that if he just turns his head Delores will be there, sitting next to him in the common room, lamplight flickering over the walls as snow falls outside.

Until Klaus breaks off with a choked gasp.

Five's head shoots up, zeroing in on his brother. Klaus looks terrified, he looks so, so scared, and Five jumps up, barking out "Klaus?" like it will help at all, like he can do anything, because it's five hours after the poisoning and a part of him already knows the answer when Klaus' eyes flicker to him and -

"He's here," Klaus whispers, and then he vanishes.

And no matter how much Five begs, he doesn't reappear.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

You have no idea how long I've waited to post this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Klaus has never really left the mausoleum.

It's been thirty years. More than that, even. Thirty years since the last time he passed through the entrance, Dad's hand gripping his shoulder, steering him and pushing him down to the floor and leaving without a backwards glance. Thirty years since he was left alone (never alone) in the cold and the dark, dirt under his fingernails, rot in his nose, screams in his throat. Thirty years since he went in.

It doesn't matter. He's still there, even after all this time, because he's never left, never came out, his body did but his mind stayed, and it's rotting away, peeling apart until he's just like the rest of them. Klaus scrabbles to regain focus (he's not there, no, please no) but -

The ghosts at The Commission didn't know Klaus. He's pretty sure they didn't even notice him, too caught up in each other's rage and pain to realize one ghost had a foot in both worlds. They didn't care about him at all - every bit of suffering and damage they inflicted on him was entirely incidental. They never went near him specifically, never followed him or blamed him or used his name, not once.

But this ghost (what's its name, he can't remember, he can't remember anything) is clawing at him, ghostly arms jabbing at his body, face twisted in hate, spitting out epithets and swears and threats, and it knows his name (how?) and it's *using* it, screaming *I'll kill you, I'll fucking kill you, Klaus do you hear me, Klaus, Klaus,* ***Klaus -***

Each use of his name sends an ice-water shock through Klaus, pulls his attention to the ghost, because he's a fucking *medium* and that goes both ways, why has no one ever understood that, if he has power over ghosts then they have power over him, more than he's ever managed, more than he ever will, *please* -

Klaus is crying, he knows that. He's begging. He's scared. He's always been scared. He's alone, he's never alone, he is alive he is dead he is in the mausoleum, he is here in the dark and cold with the ghosts that are more animals than people now, and he's never going to leave. He'll be left here, left to die, or maybe he's dead already (maybe he's always been dead) and he'll never be able to leave, just stay here with the ghosts until he's the same as them, mindless and insane with hate, forever and ever and ever.

There's a voice somewhere, one that's different from the others, and Klaus knows that that one is safe (why is it safe?), they won't hurt him (of course they'll hurt him, everyone wants

to hurt him) (not this one, never this one), if he can just focus (it's so hard) -

- except it slips away (no please no) and there is nothing else, has never been anything else, never has or will be anything else in the whole world -

- everything is black and lightless, nothing exists but the ghosts, the endless noise and calls for him, tearing away every piece of him until he is part of it too -

- everything is a brilliant searing *white*, nothing exists but the song, the sound of the world dying has never been so beautiful -

(you again?)

- it's dark, it's cold and dark and it will never change, he's here forever and ever, he can never escape, there is no such thing -

- it's bright, so bright, so *white* and he can feel himself dying as it happens, soul collapsing in a supernova -

(where am i?)

- all that ever exists, everything here is the only real thing, death all around, death in the air and his lungs and the ground and everywhere, inescapable, death death death -

- the *white* blots out the sun, outshines the universe, there is nothing that can compare, it is death incarnate -

(where do you think?)

- darkness -

- *white* -

and

then

there

is

nothing

****

Klaus wakes up slowly.

There is a sound, nearby. He doesn't know why, but it's soothing. It sounds steady and even, hardly changing pitch at all.

It is the only sound he can hear.

He can't remember why, but he likes that. It's nice, to hear the steady sound and nothing else.

He tries to figure out why.

Klaus doesn't know where he is. That's….strange, right? He's pretty sure that's strange.

It's dark, and he figures out after a few seconds it's because his eyes are closed. When he opens the, he has to blink a few times.

There is a blank expanse in front of him that Klaus eventually identifies as a ceiling. He stares at it.

The sound continues.

Klaus frowns. The sound is nice, but what is it? He tries to focus.

"- but if you look at the tempo-spatial plane from a reverse position, it becomes larger, which is because the position of where you enter the timestream is variable, and adding another dimension to things always fucks things up. In this case, specifically, it's because the fifth dimension is -"

Oh. Klaus knows who that is.

"Five," he croaks out.

"- except, of course, this is still all conjecture. The math works out, and the theory is supported by my first three jumps through time, but three data points is hardly enough to confirm things one way or another. Nevertheless, I'm going with the assumption that it's true, and have based my later conjecture entirely on this foundation. I once tried -"

Why isn't Five answering him? Five definitely loves his numbers, but Klaus isn't feeling too great right now, and he knows Five will consider that more important than his quantum theory stuff.

Come to think of it, why isn't he feeling too great? He's felt fine for the past eighteen *years,* he's a *ghost.* Ghosts don't get sick.

Ghosts don't sleep, either. But he just woke up.

Klaus struggles to get up. It takes more effort than he expected, more than he's needed since he died. The room spins and he wobbles uncertainly.

He's in a hotel room - right, they're on a job. Five is sitting on the bed, perfectly straight, staring at the wall and reciting mile after mile of technobabble in a dry, calm tone.

"Five?" Klaus says. "Uh, what are you doing?"

Five continues talking, ignoring Klaus. Which is *very* unlike Five, so -

- oh. Klaus isn't visible. He reaches inside himself and -

what the fuck.

Over half his reserves are *gone,* wiped out completely. He's been lower, can become corporeal at a tenth this much power, but still, *what the fuck is going on.*

Klaus materializes and says, "Five?"

Five *whips* his head around so fast Klaus is surprised it doesn't snap completely. He raises his hands. "Uh, buddy, what -"

Klaus interrupted by a hundred and thirty pounds of little brother *hurtling* himself into his arms and breaking into what can only be described as *wailing.*

Okay.

Clearly, whatever happened was bad. Klaus is vividly reminded of that one time he tried teleporting and instead he blinked out of existence for a week, which is the closest he's ever seen Five come to a full-blown mental breakdown and not something he ever wanted to see again. Except apparently *something* similar happened, and Klaus would really fucking like to know what. But finding out exactly what takes a backseat to making sure Five is *okay.*

It seems that will take some work.

Klaus holds Five for close to half an hour before his sobbing winds down, and Five still has a death-grip around Klaus' waist. Which is absolutely, 100% okay. Klaus would probably consent to never letting go of Five again if it would get him to stop crying like the world just ended (again).

Eventually, though, Five sniffles a bit, before he says, voice small, "It's been eighteen hours."

"Since *what*-"

And then Klaus remembers.

"Oh."

Five trembles in his grip. "They'll send the next assignment soon," he says, and for the first time, Klaus notices how much of an effort he's making to speak. His voice remains steady, but it's clearly causing him significant pain to keep it that way. "You weren't - I didn't know if you could -"

"Oh, Five," Klaus says, and it would be really hard to hug his brother any tighter but he makes a damn good go at it. "I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry."

Five takes a shaky breath. "Not your fault." He coughs, and it wracks through his body and sounds fucking terrible.

"Shit, don't talk, have you been talking the *whole time* -" Klaus moves Five to a more comfortable position, one that will hopefully let him breathe better.

Five shrugs. “Brought you back last time,” he says. Well, more like whispers.

“What did I *say,* you idiot, don’t *talk,*” Klaus looks around the room. Sadly, 1876 isn’t civilized enough to have the ability to make tea or whatever in every hotel room. Klaus is going to complain to management, see if he doesn’t.

Instead, Klaus reaches over to a pitcher of water by the bed. It’s half-empty, so at least Five has been drinking *something,* but clearly not enough. He coaxes Five to swallow some of the water.

Five wants to stop at a few sips, but Klaus is adamant, and over the next twenty minutes he finishes off the whole pitcher. Klaus takes the time to do a physical check-up. Fortunately, Five hasn’t been able to run down his health too much in the span of eighteen hours, although Klaus is definitely going to get him an entire bag of throat lozenges from wherever they’re going next. He’s also a bit dehydrated, and the pitcher is getting refilled just as soon as Five can bring himself to let go of Klaus.

Which isn’t going to be anytime soon, but that’s okay. Klaus isn’t so sure he could let go right now either.

“Okay,” Klaus sighs, once Five has drunk all the available water. “As much as I kind of want to yell at you for doing that, I think it actually did help a little, so I'm going to let it go. *Once.* Don’t do it again, *please.*”

Five twists his face around to look at Klaus. [It helped?] he asks, in their invented language. Handy, that.

“Yeah. I mean,” Klaus shrugs a little. “I don’t remember it all very well, but - I think I heard you. Here and there. But seriously, *don’t do it again.*”

The look on Five’s face is not the one of someone who will not do that again if the situation arises, but Klaus lets it go for right now. They can argue about it later, when things aren’t so raw. Instead, he readjusts his position. The floor isn’t the most comfortable place in the world, but he has the sneaking suspicion Five won’t want to move anytime soon if it involves ungluing himself from Klaus.

[You-] Five hesitates. [You okay? The ghosts?]

And then Klaus realizes what he’s been ignoring this whole time.

His head *snaps* up, and whips around to scan the room. There’s no ghosts. There’s no ghosts, and it’s quiet, it’s *quiet,* a silence he only knew in the apocalypse, something he never thought he’d get again, something he knew was now forever out of his reach, but now -

There’s no ghosts.

No Samuel Freeman.

No girl sobbing in the corner.

No distant screams from the next room.

There's *nothing.*

"Klaus?" Five says, his voice cracking, fear running through it, and Klaus curses and looks down at a wide-eyed Five, whose hand just doubled its grip on him.

"Hey, no, no, it's fine, he's gone, he's gone -" and Klaus' breath catches because *oh,* he never thought he'd say that, never thought he'd *get* to say it, but "They're all gone."

Five blinks at him.

"They're gone," Klaus says dazedly. "Oh god, I think - I think I banished them. They're *gone.* I - oh god, I -"

- and -

- he remembers the *white,* years and years ago, the end of the fucking world -

- all the ghosts, everyone, thousands and millions and *billions* dead -

- he wanted them *gone* -

"Oh my god," Klaus says. "I banished them. I banished *all* of them."

Chapter End Notes

....boom.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

The response to last chapter was very gratifying. Thank you all so much.

“But you’re sure *you* didn’t cause the apocalypse,” Five says, for what is probably the three hundredth time.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Klaus says, also for the three hundredth time. He looks exceedingly patient, and Five knows he’s belaboring the point but he needs to *know.* “It was - the light wasn’t me. I know that much. I just - couldn’t handle what came afterwards, so I banished everyone, and that’s why all the ghosts were gone.”

“How do you *forget* the biggest thing you’ve ever done with your powers?” Five asks incredulously. The biggest thing *he’s* ever done is etched into his memory, his worst mistake and greatest regret. He can’t picture his life without it. He certainly can’t imagine *forgetting* it.

“I think it was a psychotic break,” Klaus says airily, waving a hand. “You know, good old repression and shit. Yay, trauma.”

Five lets out a breath and rubs the bridge of his nose. It’s a decent theory, and he of all people knows that Klaus’ mind is not exactly *stable* when it comes to his powers. In retrospect, it seems blatantly obvious that the man with power over the dead might have had something to do with the disappearance of all the ghosts on the planet, especially since he was the only one left. But Five overlooked the possibility, so blinded by the disappearance coinciding with the apocalypse that he bundled them together and never considered it might be a separate thing altogether.

He feels like an *idiot.* He just knows that somewhere, Delores is looking at him with amusement. She was never one to offer much sympathy, which he always appreciated. She simply skipped over directly to fixing whatever it was he messed up, and that did have a better-than decent chance of making him feel better, but it also had the effect of making him feel absurdly stupid whenever there *wasn’t* a way to fix things. He’s not sure which category this one is in, but the lack of anything he can do about how wrong he was is at least a little indicative.

“Hey,” Klaus says, and Five looks at him. “Don’t feel bad. Not like we knew *that* was on the table. You know, maybe I should write a user’s manual for my other self when we go back, I wanted one of those so bad….”

“With our luck, it would become obsolete the next day when you discover a new power,” Five sighs, which triggers a coughing fit.

“What did I say about straining your throat,” Klaus scolds, and bustles around the room. “Here,” and Five gets yet another mug of honeyed tea shoved at him.

They’re two and a half days into their newest assignment. It’s lucky they have four days, because most of their time has been spent recovering from the fallout from the Samuel Freeman job. Thankfully, they’re in 1978, with (somewhat) modern amenities, so Klaus has been taking full advantage of everything the hotel room has to offer.

Five downs the tea without protest. The worst of it has faded, but his throat *does* still hurt.

“It makes sense, though,” he says, when he feels he can speak again. “What with how you struggled, early on. It’s easy for you to materialize now, but back then you were still recovering from overreaching yourself in a way you didn’t even know was possible.”

Klaus nods, a little subdued. “Yeah, turns out exorcisms take a lot out of me. Who knew.” He sighs. “Well. If it was *easy,* I’d have done it *ages* ago.”

“Yeah,” Five says, then frowns. “Do….do you think it messed with your memory, as well? I know you were high when the world ended, but you’ve always said that ghosts remember their deaths more clearly than other things. It always struck me as odd that you couldn’t remember yours very well.”

Klaus blinks. “....Dunno. Maybe. It’s all - fuzzy, for at least a couple days before I died. I thought is was the drugs, but….maybe.” He frowns, and sighs. “God, my fucking powers.”

“You can work on it now, though,” Five encourages. He sets down the empty mug, and tries to focus on Klaus, because this isn’t about Five and he can dwell later. “This is really good. You just need to practice, and then you can make the ghosts go away whenever you want.”

That gets a smile out of Klaus. Five hasn’t seen Klaus smile in over a month, and something deep inside of him unclenches at the sight.

“Yeah,” Klaus breathes, expression touched with wonder. “I can.”

Five smiles back at him. And for the first time since the Handler appeared, he feels that maybe things might just turn out okay.

****

Over the next month, Klaus works on his exorcism ability.

Five has no idea of how to contribute, which is a situation that irks him to no end, but Klaus seems to do alright with it. They have no idea whether he’s being hopelessly slow or prodigiously fast in figuring it out, but Klaus continually asserts that it must be the latter. Apparently, it’s very finicky.

During their next several jobs (which are of varying difficulty, but none that prove to be insurmountable), Klaus finds out several things about his rediscovered ability. Five doesn't write any of it down, because they really do not need The Commission to find out the true extent of Klaus' powers ("*We* don't even know that, what do you think they're going to do?" "I don't know, but the less they know, the better." "Oh, no arguments here, those wannabe-Terminators aren't getting anything from me."), but he does take mental notes.

As it turns out, there are two ways Klaus can banish other ghosts. The first one, as far as they can tell, either destroys the ghost entirely or pushes them onto another plane of existence (Klaus suggests the afterlife with perfect seriousness, and it's unclear whether he's joking or not. Five doesn't know how to react to the idea that his brother might not just *believe* in an afterlife, but factually know it exists. He's not sure how to ask). That method is intensely draining, and Klaus isn't sure how to do it on purpose.

The second one merely pushes other ghosts away from Klaus. It's far less taxing, but he has to keep it up constantly. There's a perpetually distracted air around Klaus after he figures it out, and even if he gets better at focusing on other things while doing it Five hopes he can reverse-engineer the first method soon. Klaus says that the mindset for keeping the ghosts away is tricky to hold onto, and he slips up more often than not in the beginning.

But eventually, he's walking around with an enormous grin on his face, chattering away to Five like they're back (home) in the apocalypse, his usual vibrant personality unchanged, and Five can't help but gain a near-permanent smile at that.

He has his brother back. He didn't realize how much it felt like otherwise until it happened.

They continue killing people, of course. Meticulously arranged accidents, nothing that prolongs suffering in the least, zero extra casualties, quick and clean. People are still dead by their hand, but Five points out to Klaus that if they don't do it, someone else will. The Commission is the one ensuring that these people die, *they're* just making sure the damage is minimized. Somehow, he doubts other operatives could (or would) be as careful as them about that.

Klaus raises an eyebrow at that in a way Five thinks might mean he doesn't *quite* agree, or maybe he can tell that Five is just trying to reassure him and doesn't particularly care about their victims. But he acknowledges the point, and becomes a little less melancholy after they complete an assignment. Not having to deal with ghosts twenty-four-seven probably helps with it.

Life (and death) continues. They fall into a routine. Arrive at the new time, get situated, search for their target, do recon, make plans (at least half a dozen, now, since Five is *not* going to be almost foiled by a plate of string beans again), enact them until one sticks, meander around until their next assignment arrives. It's not precisely a good life (Five might even prefer the apocalypse), but they're okay.

Five hardly keeps track of the amount of money they accrue. Klaus is entirely disinterested, and frankly Five doesn't have a very good grasp of the value of money (he's never lived a day in his life where money was anything other than worthless, whether from sheer abundance or total absence), so it's more of a distant curiosity than anything. He vaguely

wonders whether they're getting paid fairly. The number given to him at the beginning of their training means nothing to him.

Whatever. He doubts they'll get the chance to spend it. It's not like they're planning on parting from The Commission on good terms.

Three months after they're sent out into the field, two months after Klaus stabilizes his hold on his zone of exclusion, one day after they finish their twenty-fourth job, they receive a notice that they've earned a week of downtime. They're expected to return to the training facility, and the notice gives the coordinates for the Briefcase.

They were expecting this - the Trainer explained that for every three months in the field, they would be expected to come back for a medical check-up, socialization with their coworkers, and some time for relaxation. Five finds the entire thing tedious, but he has to admit that it does break the monotony of hotel room after hotel room, assassination after assassination.

He is, however, worried about Klaus. His skills have improved, but he still can't exorcize ghosts on purpose, and neither of them know if he can push away so *many* ghosts at once. Five toys with the idea of turning the offer down.

"Don't do *that,*" Klaus says, wrinkling his nose. "You were the one who said to not look suspicious, remember? That would look *really suspicious.*"

Five huffs, but has to agree. "Fine. But if you start having trouble, just tell me and we'll go back to the room - actually, I'm not sure why we'd leave the room, it's not like there's anyone we want to talk to…."

"As much fun as it would be to convince everyone we're having a sex marathon, I think we should actually get to know people. Who knows, maybe we'll hear something useful."

"What." Five says.

"I mean," Klaus scratches his head. "It's a long shot, but maybe someone heard something about the apocalypse somewhere? We should at least make an effort."

"No, wait, back up," Five says. "Convince everyone we're ***what?***"

"Oh," Klaus says. "That."

The next ten minutes or so are highly embarrassing, slightly mindboggling, and deeply disturbing. Five comes out of the whole thing with a powerful urge to develop brain bleach. Maybe he'll ask Allison to rumor him when they go back, he's not sure if she can wipe memories but he sure as fuck hopes she can. He does not want to remember anything even tangentially related to - *that.*

It definitely doesn't help that Klaus is more amused by the whole thing than anything.

"You have to admit that it makes *sense,* from their point of view," he says, perched on the bed.

"No it does not!" Five says, and maybe his voice is *slightly* higher than normal but *it is entirely warranted, okay.* "And I told you to *stop talking about it!*"

Klaus laughs and flops down on the bed. "Okay, okay," he says. "So if anyone brings it up you're stabbing them?"

"To *start* with," Five mutters, twitching.

"Then I guess I'd better be the one to talk to people, then," Klaus says.

"What?" Five snaps his head up and glares at his brother. "Absolutely not, we're going together. And *if* someone responds better to you you can talk, but I'm taking point on this."

Klaus blinks at him. "Why?"

"....Because," Five says.

Because Five has dragged Klaus into far too many painful situations over the last four months. Because his brother had a mental breakdown directly thanks to Five's decisions. Because while Five and Klaus aren't - *that,* if people think they *are* there's going to be *comments* about it, and Five has heard enough about Klaus' life to know that those comments are going to be familiar to him.

Because Five has hurt his brother enough.

Klaus tilts his head, and looks confused. Five declines to enlighten him.

"....Okay," Klaus says in bemusement. "Well, then. Looks like it's R&R time."

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I figured y'all deserved some lighter fare after what I've put you through so far.

Being back in the Facility is weird. Mostly because Klaus didn't actually manage to take in most (or any, really) details about it the first time around, so the whole place is basically new territory for him.

There are still the ghosts, of course. There's always the ghosts. The sheer *number* of them take more attention to hold back than usual, but he's been practicing nonstop for months now and it's hardly a strain anymore. He still hasn't figured out how to permanently banish them, but you can't win 'em all.

(Sometimes, he wonders about Ben. Did he just throw Ben into the afterlife? Or did he permanently destroy the one person who stuck by him his whole life? He doesn't know. He's not sure he wants to find out.)

(They'll undo it, anyways. They'll fix it.)

(They have to.)

Anyways.

The building itself is about as large as a moderately-sized rec center. The foliage outside is terrifyingly well-kept, and he has no idea how. He has no idea *why,* either, unless it's purpose is to ward off snoopers by making them disturbed by all the unnatural perfection surrounding them, in which case it does its job excellently.

Their room, Five informs him, is a different one than last time, not that it matters. Klaus is impressed with how The Commission manages to outdo all the other hotels they've stayed at in sheer soul-sucking blandness.

"How did you not go *insane,* staring at this tiny depressing little room all day?" Klaus marvels, turning around in wonder.

"I was mostly focused on not letting *you* go insane," Five replies, unpacking his meager belongings. He looks around. "Although I admit it did get tedious at times."

"No kidding," Klaus mutters. There isn't even artwork on the walls. He squints at the paint job and tries to come up with a color other than 'boring'. He fails.

"Now that you're coherent, want to spy on the neighbors?" Five asks.

“Oh, do I ever!” Klaus claps. Then he pauses. “Wait, aren’t we being bugged? You said something about bugs.”

“If The Commission has any sense at all, we’re being bugged,” Five waves his hand. “But I’m assuming they’re also smart enough to know that we can spy on anyone in this building and have no qualms about doing so. I doubt you’ll find anything of real interest,” meaning ‘anything about the apocalypse’ “but maybe assassin gossip will be mildly amusing.”

Klaus rubs his hands together in glee. “It sounds like the best kind of gossip.” He reflects. “Well, no, that would probably be hairdresser gossip, they hear *everything.* But a close second, at least.”

“Mmm,” Five says, pulling out - what else - a notebook. He settles down on the bed. “Better get to it, then.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Klaus huffs, waving goodbye (left hand) and de-visibling. “Enjoy your decimals.”

“Fractions,” Five corrects absently, and Klaus twitches and glares. Dammit, Five *knows* his history with fractions. It was *his fault.* Klaus sticks his tongue out, despite Five being unable to see it, and stomps off.

Exploring the building doesn’t take more than an hour or so. There are a lot of rooms for various kinds of physical activity - not just treadmills and bike machines, but fully-featured obstacle courses and simulated environments. Klaus vaguely remembers being in a few of the rooms last time, but for the death of him he can’t recall what the fuck they did outside of ‘probably training’. It all looks so different when it’s not coated in gore and the souls of the eternally damned.

There are maybe twenty miscellaneous employees throughout the building, a dozen other assassins also on leave, and a few newbies going through training. Klaus wonders if he and Five will be used to determine their skill level. Probably. Klaus sort of remembers fighting other people.

(He also remembers carving up one guy like a Christmas turkey. He’s not so upset over that, considering Five’s *only arm* got dislocated, but he doesn’t know if the guy managed to recover. Normally, cutting where he did would ensure a firm ‘no’ on that, but maybe The Commission fixed it. Or they just killed him. From what Klaus has seen, that seems to be their definition of ‘fixing’.)

Loitering around people unseen turns out to be surprisingly boring. He has no way to steer the conversation to topics he wants to hear about, so he ends up listening in on a discussion of the merits of a tiny mom-and-pop restaurant in 1956, an argument over whose turn it is to do the laundry, a fucking soliloquey about the declining standards of The Commission’s employee healthcare, and an exchange so full of in-jokes and references that it’s basically incomprehensible. That’s not counting all the ones who are exercising like the world depends on it, and remain completely uninterested in engaging their fellow humans in conversation.

Wow, no wonder these people's ghosts are so pissed. Klaus is halfway to throwing a tantrum himself, just to get them to *do* something.

Which….actually isn't forbidden.

Klaus stops in the middle of the hallway.

Five threatened Klaus with re-death if he so much as moved any of Five's things a millimeter out of place, and Klaus knows better than to disobey when Five looks like *that.* And it's not like Klaus could really give him a jump scare. Living with a ghost in the apocalypse has inured Five to a *very* wide range of phenomena. Making things float around didn't even get him to look up from his math. All that effort Klaus spent figuring out how to become corporeal without becoming visible - wasted.

These people, on the other hand….

Klaus can't show up in mirrors at the moment, but he just knows his grin is stretching from ear to ear.

He cackles to himself, before getting to work.

****

"Nice dress," Five says absently, when he returns to their room.

"Danke," Klaus says, twirling. He smooths down the fabric and beams. He decided that if he was going to enjoy himself, he might as well look his best, and went all-out on his wardrobe. He looks *stunning,* if he does say so himself.

"Have fun?" Five asks, not looking up from his notebook.

Klaus lets out a laugh. "Oh, *yes,*" he says, dancing over to the bed and bouncing over to sit next to Five.

"Sounded like it," Five says.

Right on cue, there is a terrified shriek that comes through the wall. It's the sound of someone who should really be more than experienced enough to be unflappable in the face of anything life may throw at them, but is finding that a hard thing to remember at the moment. It's stifled partway through, but Klaus' grin stretches wider anyways.

"In the future," Five says idly, frowning at a string of jumbled numbers and symbols, "Could you refrain from causing mass hysteria when I'm trying to work? It's distracting."

The sound of hurried feet rushes past their door. Then two more. They give off the impression that if the people attached to the feet were one iota less dignified, they would be sprinting for all they're worth.

"I have *eighteen years* of pent-up chaos energy to unleash on the unwitting populace, Fivey," Klaus says, with absolute seriousness. "You're just gonna have to deal with it."

The lights flicker. Klaus smiles serenely, even as Five sends him an annoyed look. The room is plunged into darkness.

Klaus sighs contentedly, and drapes himself on Five. “I am so happy,” he announces.

“Speak for yourself,” Five grumbles. He tries to push Klaus off himself, but Klaus has mastered the art of the boneless cling, and the attempt is unsuccessful.

“Fiiiive,” Klaus whines. “I’m feeling *unappreciated* here, really I am. Don’t you even want to hear the highlights?”

“No,” Five snaps, escalating to wriggling. “Get *off* me, you -”

Someone runs past their door, gasping in high, panicked breaths. Must be one of the newbies. Or that one guy down the hall. He seemed the high-strung sort.

The lights splutter back on. Klaus buries his face in Five’s hair and laughs.

“Klaus, I swear to god if you don’t let go of me *this instant* -”

“Aw, come on, Five, don’t be like that,” Klaus giggles. He can’t remember the last time he felt this euphoric. It’s almost like drugs, except cleaner, and not having to look over his shoulder for some random asshole offended by the existence of junkies in general.

“Don’t make me hurt you, Klaus, I fucking will if you don’t *let me fucking* -”

There’s a knock on the door.

They look at it.

Five takes the moment of distraction to shimmy out of Klaus’ grip. He looks adorably rumpled, and stalks over to the door. Klaus follows, invisibly.

Five opens the door. Klaus cranes his neck around to see. There’s a woman with South Asian features standing outside, a hunted expression on her face. A few strands of her hair are gently smoking.

“Um,” she says. “I’m sorry, I just wanted to know if you’ve noticed anything - strange - going on, it’s happening all over -”

“We’re having sex,” Five snaps, and slams the door in her face.

He makes it halfway back to the bed before he stops in his tracks.

An expression of dawning horror creeps across his face. He slowly turns around to stare at the door.

The room is silent as the grave.

Klaus can’t help himself.

He *howls* with laughter, falling to the floor and flopping around like a dying fish. He holds his sides because even though he can't get stitches anymore they still start to hurt. The shrieks would probably deafen someone if they were audible. He tries to come into visibility, but can't manage more than a flicker or two. Five's expression fuels him even further, his brother rooted to the ground and staring into nothing with a look that very clearly says he would like nothing more than to stop existing right this very second, please.

After several very long minutes, Five turns around and staggers to the bed. He flops onto it, face-first.

This causes Klaus to redouble his laughter.

Ten minutes later, Five lifts his head from the blanket. He looks in the vague direction of where Klaus is and says, in an impressively steady voice, "So. I'm going to kill everyone in the building. Want to help?"

Klaus *just* manages to make himself corporeal. He's still flickering slightly, he knows, but it's nearly impossible to keep the ghosts away *and* hold onto visibility at the moment.

"Aw, really?" he says, voice overflowing with mirth. "And here I was hoping we could get back to having sex."

Five gives a full-body twitch, and buries his face back in the bedspread.

Klaus loses his hold on the physical plane as he starts laughing again.

****

The Trainer shows up a while later. She chews Klaus out for almost an hour for causing the base to implode. He tries to protest his innocence, but she looks so unimpressed he gets a flashback to dear old Dad and ends up giving a rather lackluster defense. Five is still bluescreening on the bed, so no help there.

Klaus is tasked with setting everything back to the way it was. That is manifestly impossible in at least two cases, but trying to explain that to the Trainer just gets a *scarily* accurate impression of the *Look* Ben (and later Five) used whenever Klaus had tested his patience one too many times. Klaus doesn't argue, after that.

It takes the rest of the day, and he has to improvise on the impossible things (he was followed around by a dead chef for some time when he was eight, that totally means he can handle an oven, right?).

On the bright side, it actually looks like the Trainer didn't inform anyone of the *source* of all the stuff going wrong. Everyone is twitchier than Five that one time he drank an entire carafe of espresso. Klaus hears at least two different rumors about the base being haunted, which are maybe supported by random things moving around the ones spreading them.

By the time things are all back to normal, everyone in the building is even more paranoid than they were when everything was happening.

Klaus can’t stop grinning to himself.

Today was a fucking *excellent* day.

Chapter 13

It's strange, having to call Klaus 'Raithe' in front of other people. It's not his name, and Five has to suppress a feeling of *wrongness* whenever it comes out of him mouth. Klaus only sometimes remembers to answer to it, too, which gives the impression that he's either partially deaf or has terrible situational awareness.

Well, only good things can come from underestimation. It would grate on Five, who has always had the burning need for people to understand *exactly* what kind of threat he poses (he refuses to admit it stems from Reginald's frequent dismissal of him, back when he didn't have a good hold on his power). But Klaus has been called far, far worse than 'easily distractible,' often to his face (Five fights back a familiar rush of white-hot rage at the thought), so he hardly even notices.

Now that the first twenty slots of Five's priorities aren't all 'keep my brother sane', Five finds that it is, actually, very boring to sit around in a tiny featureless room. He suspects they were intentionally designed this way to encourage their occupants to go outside and mingle.

Five hates mingling. Eighteen years of near-total isolation has not done his social skills any favors, and it shows.

And so, for the most part, he refrains from interacting with other people. This is slightly counterproductive to their goal of finding out more about the end of the world, but it's only been three months. The apocalypse may not have taught Five social skills, but it *has* managed to instill a modicum of patience.

On the third day, the Trainer comes by their room and asks them to participate in an exercise. Them versus another pair of assassins, one of which is looking for a new partner and the other of which is trying out for the part. They want to see how well they work together.

Five shrugs and accepts, not that he doesn't suspect it's less of an offer and more of an order. He and Klaus go to one of the training rooms - the one made up to resemble the interior of a small apartment building. There are eight 'apartments', four on each 'floor', and they're even moderately furnished. Reginald Hargreeves would approve at the thoroughness.

Naturally, the aim of forcing the participants into second-guessing their actions in such close-quarters kind of falls apart when Klaus' powers are taken into account.

"Okay," Klaus says, appearing in front of Five. "So they're on the second level, upper right-hand apartment. They're going to do a systematic search, but I think Mustache is going to go rogue, he seems like the 'loose cannon' type."

"Weapons?" Five says, checking his own gun. Rubber bullets, of course, but those still pack a punch.

"Two handguns and a set of knives. Not really weighted for throwing, but I wouldn't rule it out."

Five scowls. “We only have one gun!”

“I know, we should complain to Management,” Klaus says laconically, leaning against the wall. “A gun and teleportation and invisibility and incorporeality, we don’t even stand a chance!”

“Shut up,” Five says irritably. He debates with himself for a moment. “There’s no time limit, right?”

“Right….”

“Excellent,” Five smiles. It’s not a nice smile. “They want to see how they function as a team. Let’s see how well they do under *stress*.”

****

Seven hours later, they walk out of the training room.

Politely, they allow the other two assassins to be carried out before them. One has half his mustache gone and a broken arm, the other will very probably lose her eye.

“I don’t think they would have worked very well together,” Five comments idly. “Just my opinion.”

The Trainer glares at them.

Klaus raises his hands. “Don’t look at us,” he says, grinning. “We didn’t lay a finger on them.”

****

For some reason, they’re asked to participate in *more* exercises.

“Didn’t they learn their lesson?” Klaus huffs incredulously.

Five groans in realization. “They did,” he says. “And it’s that we’re *good* at this. We exposed weaknesses in their operatives, and that’s something they want to know about. Not to mention it shows them *our* playbook.”

“Oh,” Klaus frowns. “Damn.”

Five punches the bed and rolls over. He growls.

Stupid of him, to get carried away. He hasn’t been in a fight in *ages* (his training period only sort of counts, it’s not like he was *focused* on it), and that familiar rush caught him by surprise. The desire to toy with people, make them do what he wants them to do with a few precise actions. The need to be the smartest one in the room, and have everyone know it. The smug, solid certainty of having so much *power* that his opponents never even stand a chance.

It was an obvious trap. Stupid, stupid, *stupid.*

“Hey,” Klaus says, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Everyone has off days. Don’t get too broken up about it. Not like either of us is psychic.”

Five twists to glare up at him. “We’re the Umbrella Academy, Klaus. We can’t *have* off-days.”

Klaus raises an eyebrow. “Well, hello there, Daddy. Be a dear and stop possessing Five for a minute, will you?”

“I’m serious, Klaus,” Five says, sitting upright and shrugging off his brother’s hand. “If we’re going to” stop the apocalypse “do this, we need to be *better* than this. We’ll fail, otherwise.”

“Okay, fine, no arguments here,” Klaus throws up his hands. “But seriously, what are you upset about? So they know how we fight. Big whoop. I think they might’ve been able to figure that out over the next five years. Wouldn’t trying to hide stuff just bring down *more* attention?”

“That -” Five frowns.

Klaus….does have a point. Five years is a long time. The Commission has vastly superior resources, and have already been spying on them for a good long while now. Even if they aren’t particularly high priorities, The Commission can almost certainly find out nearly anything it wants about them with minimal effort. Deceiving it would probably take a level of acting neither of them can even approach.

If anything, The Commission deceiving them into believing they’re successful is far more likely.

Five -

Five frowns down at his hand. He curls the fingers into a fist, and builds up a haze of energy around it.

Time travel is complicated stuff. Five has at least a dozen notebooks full of theory - or he did, anyways, back in the apocalypse. He’s stared at them long enough that he can remember most of them. He’s worked out a *lot* over the past eighteen years, aided immensely by Klaus’ existence. He’s not sure how long it would have taken without a ghost to test various dimensional bullshit on, but he has a feeling it would be at *least* twice as long.

There have been setbacks. Various things - they could happen to anyone. A misplaced number here, a flawed paragraph in a textbook there. Weeks or months of work unraveling before his eyes, moving the goal of time-travel further and further away. Mistakes that led him to cursing and screaming at the chalkboards, tears building up in his eyes until Klaus pulled him away to calm down. Stupid little things.

Suspiciously little things.

Five feels cold.

A misplaced number here.

A flawed textbook paragraph there.

The Handler's sharp, cold smile.

Five very carefully lowers his hand.

"Five?" Klaus says with concern. Five isn't sure what expression is on his face.

"You're right," he says, managing to keep his voice steady. "I don't think we could really keep anything from them. I guess we'll just try our best. Don't hold back."

"Uh," Klaus says, looking at him oddly. "Okay. You're kind of being weird, though."

"Am I?" Five says lightly. He gets up and moves to the nightstand, where his notebook sits. He's tried to not let it out of his sight, much like he hasn't let the eyeball leave his person, but he slowly flips through every page, scrutinizing the numbers on the page and comparing them to the ones in his memory.

There have been a couple times where he left it unattended. Just a couple times.

"Well, not too much more than usual, I guess." Klaus comes to stand by him as he turns the pages.

"It's the being tricked part," Five says. "Still a bit sore about that."

And - there.

Five remembers writing that equation. He remembers placing the decimal point. He remembers working out the answer to that one tricky bit on the top, that fed into the rest of it and was the keystone for the entire next six pages. He remembers exactly what he wrote down.

The decimal point has been moved.

He doesn't linger. Doesn't stop and stare. Doesn't give any indication he's noticed. He turns to the next page, and the next, and the next.

"You should get some sleep," Klaus says, bumping his shoulder. He slings an arm around Five's back, and before Five can protest he's being lifted up in a princess carry and deposited on the bed. Despite himself, despite the coldness still spreading through his chest, Five gives an undignified yelp.

"Klaus," he says, glaring at his brother.

"Nope!" Klaus says cheerfully. "Beddy-bye time, Five! I'm invoking big brother status, it's time for you to get some shuteye. We can destroy all those assholes in training tomorrow, won't that be fun?"

Five considers the idea of stabbing a large number of people.

It's the most appealing thing he can imagine, right now.

"Yes," Five says, and allows himself to be put to bed.

****

At the end of their downtime, the Trainer is glad to see them go. They're the only ones who haven't visited the infirmary over the past week. It's so wonderful to have guilt-free targets to vent his frustrations on.

They arrive at their newest hotel (Ireland, 1879), and Five barely has time to set himself on the bed before Klaus stashes the Briefcase in the bathroom, sits down next to him, and says, "So, what did you figure out they did?"

It shouldn't catch Five off-guard to realize how well his brother knows him, but it does anyways. His surprise must show on his face, because Klaus rolls his eyes and scoffs. "Please. That look on your face was the same one when Ben spilled juice on your favorite calculus textbook. You know he described it as one of the top five terrifying experiences of his entire life, right? He ranked it above his *literal death.*"

Five gracefully ignores that, and explains to Klaus exactly what he realized.

Klaus whistles, long and low. "*Wow.* What *dicks.*" He thinks for a moment. "How sure are you that we're not bugged right now?"

"It's possible," Five admits. "But….it would be going a ways out of their way, and I don't think we're *that* high on the priority list. Just mess up a few of my equations here and there, and we actually *can't* be too much of a problem. We have no idea where Headquarters are - or *when* they are - we have no information on the apocalypse and no real avenues to getting any, we're skilled but I seriously doubt we can bring down The Commission without a straight-up miracle…."

It feels like a failure to say all of that out loud. Five tries to keep his voice even, but he's not sure he succeeds.

Klaus pulls him into a hug. Five buries his head in his brother's shoulder and pretends things are okay, just for a little bit.

He remembers the fantasy he'd described to Klaus. About fixing everything, quickly and easily and perfectly. About treating The Commission as an afterthought they could sidestep without a second glance. About living happily ever after.

Five holds onto his brother.

"I'll have to do the equations in my head," he says eventually. "It'll take longer, but it's safer. No evidence. They'll probably suspect, but I doubt they have literal mindreaders."

"Knock on wood," Klaus mutters, tapping the bedpost.

Five sighs. "Yeah. Knock on wood."

They sit there for a while longer.

“Can we wait until tomorrow to start the job?” Five asks quietly. “I know we only have two days, but -”

“Of course,” Klaus says. “Yeah, of course. Love you.”

“Thanks,” Five mumbles. “Love you too.” He scrunches himself further into Klaus’ chest. Klaus starts humming, some vague melody he brings up on occasions when Five really wants some hot chocolate but they don’t have any. It’s a decent substitute.

Five finds his eyelids slipping shut.

*The next several years are going to be **very** tedious,* Five thinks, in the moment before he tips over the edge of sleep.

And then he knows nothing but blackness.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> Alright! I'm on the last few chapters of the final story, I think I might even get it done before I start posting. Which, btw, will be exactly one week from now, and follow an every-two-days schedule instead of my usual M/W/F.
>
> I also am up to chapter 18 of 'it comes and goes', you should definitely check out that sweet, sweet bonus content!

Time drip, drip, drips on by.

It’s not exactly like being on the streets, but in some ways it’s startlingly similar. Klaus has no idea where he’ll be from one day to the next, or who he’ll encounter. There’s danger around depressingly many of the corners he turns, often of the stabby kind. There’s a comparable level of violence. Plus the annoying tagalong brother.

On the other hand, he was never once safe on the streets. It was never okay to let his guard down, but he did it anyways because it wasn’t like he could stop anyone that wanted to hurt him, so why not have some fun in between? And however used to their routine he and Ben were, they both knew nothing was going to get better. Klaus wouldn’t get sober, Ben wouldn’t move on - it was really very depressing when you thought about it.

Here - here it’s different. Klaus is the baddest motherfucker in any town they end up in. He can run rings around basically anyone they meet. He doesn’t have to be afraid of anyone. It’s strange, realizing that. Difficult, to shed that fear when he’s carried it for nearly fifty years by now. He’s not sure he’ll ever fully manage it, but it - lessens, somewhat.

His relationship with Five couldn’t be more different than his one with Ben, too. He’s thought, several (dozen) times over the years, about the irony that Ben had to take care of him and now he’s taking care of Five, but that’s not all of it. Klaus knows he hurt Ben. What with all he did, he’s surprised Ben even stuck around, watching his useless junkie brother sleep in alleys and pop pills and hook up with scumbags and maybe, kind of, slowly try to kill himself. Ben lashed out sometimes, and Klaus could see the raw hurt his actions were causing his brother.

Klaus has hurt Five, too, but the difference here is that he’s always stopped that as soon as he figured out how. Ben would - well, Ben would ask why he couldn’t do that before, and Klaus would have to say that it’s not because he didn’t know how, but because he didn’t want to. Not badly enough.

He’s not looking forward to that conversation.

But time still drip, drip, drips slowly by, and their contract inches steadily closer to completion.

They become minor celebrities in operative circles, then major ones. After the Calhoun job (and Klaus has *no* idea how they pulled that one off) they become outright revered. No one can match them in sparring or combat, not apart and *definitely* not together. They're the top dogs, the cream of the crop, and everyone knows it.

All the attention is weird. There are sidelong looks every time they come in for downtime, whispered conversations in corners and myths that grow with every telling. It's commonly accepted knowledge that they're lovers, and aside from twitching once or twice Five resigns himself to the inevitable. Although everyone quickly learns not to mention anything of the sort in front of them (Klaus eavesdrops and learns this gives people the impression that they're in some sort of - arrangement he might actually be interested in, if the other person were *anyone* other than his brother. He quickly sympathizes with Five's feelings about the whole situation, even if his own horror is more 'amused' than 'resigned').

They remain completely in the dark about the apocalypse, and eventually they accept that unless they can figure out how to get to Headquarters, they're never going to find squat. And since Headquarters is only open to Management-level personnel, well.

Five works on time-travel. It's slow going, now that he can only keep track of everything inside his head. There are times when he starts having a staring contest with the Eye, which hasn't happened for over a decade now. Klaus drags him away every time, because they both memorized the fucking thing years and years ago, there is no reason to stare at it like the name of the owner is printed in microscopic lettering in the iris. Five huffs at him every time, but admits once that it's probably best Klaus distract him when he gets like that.

Sometimes Klaus gets presents for Five. Not often, because they do have to travel light, but little things here and there. Five pretends to not care, and claims to throw them away, but the pouch with the Eye gets a little fuller each time. Klaus is particularly proud of that. His gift-giving abilities have been honed by years of being able to find and take whatever the hell he wants, and now he's even more spoiled for choice. It's great.

And time still drips by.

Klaus learns how to permanently banish ghosts. It takes some doing, and a certain amount of probably-unethical experimentation (there's plenty of ghosts he has no qualms about possibly destroying forever, and quite a few of them are out of reach, but you can find certain kinds of people anywhere and anywhen on Earth), but he manages it. He reserves it for the ghosts that are really crazy or really angry or really fucking miserable, but that's still like half the ones they encounter. Five is deeply disturbed by this, and Klaus isn't quite sure why.

He talks to them, sometimes. The more coherent ones. When he's feeling particularly brave or foolhardy. The moment they start to lose themselves, catch onto a spiral of anger or fear or depression, he shoves them away again. He might be the world's only true medium, but that doesn't mean he has to *act* like it if he doesn't want to. Any ghosties who don't understand that get to hang out on the very edges of the party, where he can maybe see them if it's very flat and he squints.

He fucking loves being able to keep them away. He practices trying to explain how to do it to his younger self - he can do it for them both until younger-him gets it, but he knows himself, and he won't expect it to last. He'll want to know how to do it on his own and not rely on anyone else for it, even another version of himself. He of all people knows how reliable he is.

Klaus also learns how to make other ghosts visible and/or corporeal. It's not very useful as they are now, but he cannot fucking wait to get back to Ben. Five has promised to hug him. It is going to be glorious. With a little practice, Klaus can allow certain ghosts inside his zone of exclusion, so Ben won't be affected by that.

It turns out world-and-time-hopping give some excellent opportunities for learning. Although all the stuff Klaus looks into is limited by the fact that they only stay in places a few days at a time, a week at most. He gains a lot of basic, introductory-level knowledge on a wide variety of topics, such as metalworking and leathermaking and fishing and hunting and autopsying and zookeeping and harp-playing and dog-breeding and geisha-ing and painting and sculpting and lap-dancing (turns out he was doing it wrong all this time, who knew?) and fabric-dyeing and castle-building and herb-gathering and alligator-feeding and engraving and chemistry and candle-making and forgery and wood-carving and acting and swimming and neurosurgery and hot-air-ballooning and silk-screening and quill-making and violin-stringing (he can bond with Vanya when he gets back!) and stamps and pyramid-robbing and clock-making and blueberry-picking and navigation and printing and Greek-fire-making and coal-mining and chocolate-tasting and sewing and secret-service-training and falconry and magazine-editing and a few other things. He can only do a couple of them unaided, but it's *interesting* in a way he suspects that sitting down to actually focus on one topic at a time wouldn't be.

"It's a curriculum as chaotic as you are," Five remarks dryly, and Klaus beams at the compliment. Five sometimes deigns to come along with Klaus to learn things, too. Klaus occasionally wishes his brother did so more often, especially when he uses at least a quarter of all that knowledge in Calhoun and it saves their *asses,* but Five knows how to make Greek fire, at least. Klaus should maybe be more concerned about than he is, but eh, it'll probably be fine.

Time drips by. Slowly, it seems, until Klaus looks back and realizes it feels like it happened all at once. Five says that's what relativity feels like.

And one, two, three, four and a half years after they agree to the Handler's proposition, they're once again in a tiny hotel room, talking about everything and nothing.

"I still don't see why you won't say waffles are better," Klaus sniffs. "Eggs are great, sure, but nothing special."

"I'm not going to debate this with you, Klaus," Five says, reading one of those trashy sci-fi novels he's not-so-secretly addicted to. Well, it's not a secret from Klaus. No one else in existence knows, so it's probably actually a fairly well-kept secret.

"So you admit waffles are superior," Klaus says triumphantly.

"I did *not* say that," Five says, looking up.

“Oh?” Klaus crosses his arms. “Explain your reasoning.”

“The very fact that you’re supporting *frozen* waffles practically builds my case for me -” Five’s no doubt impressive tirade is interrupted by a knock on the door.

They shoot each other bemused glances. The job they were on was finished a few hours ago, and they got away clean. They’ve only been here for a day and a half. They haven’t interacted with any of the locals long enough to give their names, much less say where they’re staying.

Five grabs the gun and moves to the corner of the room, while Klaus pokes his head through the door. He doesn’t recognize the person standing outside at first, until he notices the Briefcase she’s carrying. Then he remembers, vaguely, seeing her around the Facility a couple times.

Klaus pulls his head back inside and opens the door slightly, without removing the chain. He arches an eyebrow at her.

Her eyes widen in a way that’s grown familiar in the past couple years, but she remains professional. She clears her throat and says, with a slight Cockney accent, “Hello. My partner and I were doing a job in this neighborhood and - well, to be perfectly frank, he’s an idiot and got himself killed before we could finish it. I received a message telling me this location, and - I was hoping I would find backup here. I don’t suppose you would be interested.”

Klaus closes the door and looks over at Five, who shrugs. “Why not,” he says wearily.

The chain is unhooked, and Klaus lets the woman in.

She doesn’t side-eye the single bed, which gives her some points, at least. “So,” Klaus says, “If I ever knew your name I forgot it. You are?”

“....Lacquer.” she says, after a startled pause. She blinks at Klaus. “Not many people have heard you speak. Quite a few of us thought you were mute.”

“He’s not allowed to talk when we’re at the Facility,” Five says, putting away the gun. “On account of the fact that he never shuts the fuck up.”

“Excuse me!” Klaus whirls around to face his brother and points accusingly. “I can too shut the fuck up! You *wound* me, Five, you really do, and here I am *selflessly* working to support you as best I can in all your murdery endeavors. The *ungratefulness* of people today, really, if I hadn’t been there in London -”

Five glares at him. “You were the one who was responsible for it blowing up in the *first* place, don’t pretend otherwise.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Klaus sniffs. Then he looks over at Lacquer standing awkwardly by the door. He ushers her over to the bed. “Sit, sit! So tell us all about this big bad job that’s got you stuck. And I’m sorry about your partner, were you close?”

Lacquer shakes her head. “Not particularly, no.” She hesitates. “I guess I should bring his body back for burial, though. I’d want him to do the same.”

“We can do that, sure,” Klaus nods.

“Not that this isn’t touching,” Five drawls, coming up to stand next to Klaus. “But I don’t believe it’s all that important. Who are you targeting in 1959 that ended up with an operative dead?”

Lacquer straightens up. “Right,” she says. “So.”

She explains, and by the end of it Five looks like he wishes he turned her away at the door. Klaus sort of agrees.

This is going to be *such* a headache.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

GOOD NEWS, EVERYONE!

I am now only several chapters away from completing the final story. *The end is in sight.*

Also, I finally got around to putting an index in 'it comes and goes', with notes about where everything goes timeline-wise. It's much nicer now. You're welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their person of interest is one Randall Smith. He's the son of a major New York gangster - or, at least, he was, until two days ago when his father was assassinated by parties unknown. Said assassins apparently took offense to Smith Sr.'s business practices. Not the illegal ones, the ones where he turned out to be cheating literally almost anyone he had dealings with. Once word got out, Randall became quite the target. If he dies, there's quite literally no telling who pulled the trigger.

Which would be fantastic for them, if their orders were to pull the trigger. Instead, they have to *protect* him.

Protection assignments aren't all that common, but they've done a couple dozen over the years. Five has found that he doesn't like them. Assassination is simple. Straightforward. Killing is easy as breathing, and he gives it about an equal amount of thought. *Preventing* someone from being killed, however, is a bit trickier.

(He tries not to think about what that says for his chances at saving his family.)

There are so many variables Five has to take into account - who wants the target dead (apparently literally everyone), what resources they have (quite a lot, actually), their organization and numbers and competency (strict and many and worrying, in that order), and, of course, the wild card of the target himself.

"So you lost him in West Manhattan," Five says, frowning at the map.

"Here," Lacquer points. "He definitely got away from the O'Connells, but I was trying to prevent Autumn from bleeding out and didn't see which way he went."

"Do you know if he has any nearby safehouses?"

"No, the closest one is over on the other side of town. And - I'm not entirely positive, but I think he might have been wounded."

“Movements of the mobs?” Klaus says, poking his head in.

“Unknown,” Lacquer sighs.

“I think our best bet is to follow Smith’s trail. Raithe,” Five glances at Klaus, who salutes and goes incorporeal. Five hears a slight inhale from Lacquer, but she doesn’t comment. Point to her.

They spend the next half-hour going over everything Lacquer and her partner did since they arrived in the city three days ago. Much of it was finding out everything they can about what the situation actually is, which causes Five to once again curse Headquarters for their stinginess regarding information.

“Couldn’t have given you *context,*” Five mutters. “Thrown in a note saying ‘by the way, he’s the son of a mob boss and half of New York’s underworld is after him, here’s a list of all his safehouses and contacts.’ No, just ‘Protect Randall Smith.’ How many Randall Smiths did you investigate?”

“We had a picture, so it wasn’t too bad,” Lacquer says. “But - yeah, some context would have been nice. Management.”

“Management,” Five agrees vehemently, and for a brief moment they are united in their indignation.

It’s broken by a roll of thunder. Five goes to the window and moves the curtains aside. He watches as spots of wet appear outside, slowly coming faster. Within a few minutes, there is a downpour outside.

“This should make things easier,” Five comments.

“Really?”

He turns to look at Lacquer as she comes up to stand next to him. He lets the curtains fall back and gives a half-shrug. “The mobs will be slowed down, and so will Smith, but Raithe won’t. He might even catch up to Smith.”

Lacquer nods slowly. “Right,” she says. “I forgot, you guys are - special.”

“If you forgot that, it’s no wonder you’re doing so badly,” Five says, and returns to the map. He traces the distance from their hotel to where Smith disappeared. A few miles, more or less. Klaus should have gotten there already. It’s been less than two hours since the shootout, so the chances of Smith travelling very far - especially if he’s wounded - are small.

“I didn’t mean that,” Lacquer says with a huff. “I mean - I know what you can do, broadly. It’s just that it’s hard to apply that to how you work, and realizing just how different your jobs must be. Do you really never torture people?”

“We don’t need to,” Five says absently. “And torture is unreliable, anyways.”

“Yeah, but it’s the cheapest way for the rest of us to get information. We can’t all turn invisible.”

“And teleport. Don’t forget the teleporting.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Lacquer shifts slightly for a few seconds, before leaning forward. “Okay, I’ve got to ask - what actually *happened* in London? Because I’ve heard a *lot* of conflicting stories, and the only common threads are the poisoned custard and six Faberge eggs.”

“There were only three eggs,” Five grimaces. “Although they caused enough trouble for six.”

“Then it’s really true you -”

“If you’re really this distractible, you should really step down before you get another partner killed,” Five informs her.

There is blessed silence.

Five taps the map and considers. Klaus should be able to cover enough ground to find Smith, even if he isn’t wounded. Priority one will be finding a safe place to store him, and then Klaus will be able to come back. Five can jump over to guard Smith while Klaus and Lacquer follow and secure the area. Smith won’t be unguarded for more than fifteen or twenty minutes, depending on where Klaus puts him.

Acceptable risk. Klaus is smart enough to find a place that’s extremely inconvenient to get to without teleportation or superstrength, or being carried by such. The job is for another six days, which is actually fairly short for protection detail. Small mercies.

Five debates with himself over whether to bring Smith back to the hotel room. The mobs almost certainly wouldn’t find him here, but transporting him will be a hassle. Five resolves to see the place Klaus finds before making a final decision.

“Do you know the headquarters of the various organizations after Smith?” Five asks Lacquer.

It takes her a moment to reply. “Yes,” she says, and comes over to point them out.

By the time Klaus comes back, they have a viable plan for the next (ugh) six days. Lacquer doesn’t speak to Five more than she has to, which suits him just fine. Klaus engages her in conversation again as Five jumps off to Smith’s location. Extroverted weirdo.

Five reaches Smith, who *was* wounded, in the leg. Klaus tended to the injury, and the prognosis is good but will take Smith off his feet for the next couple weeks, so at least he won’t be running off on them anytime soon. Smith is sleeping safely in an underground impound lot, and even if one were to note the slight crookedness of the entryway bars the first explanation that comes to mind won’t be that they were bent out of shape and then back in again.

It’s a decently defensible position, although they’ll have to ferry in all their supplies. Five considers it an acceptable sacrifice. He settles in, and waits.

****

When Klaus and Lacquer arrive, they divide up their duties.

Lacquer will stay with Smith, and be primarily responsible for his care. Five will set up a perimeter and keep watch for any hostiles. Klaus will visit the various gangsters, and do his usual terrifying-infosec-hazard thing.

“I’ll check in periodically,” Five tells Lacquer. “And Raithe, tell me when you come back, we’ll reconvene and discuss our long-term strategy.”

“But of course,” Klaus says.

It’s monotonous, jumping around the perimeter and scanning for suspicious characters (they’re in New York at night, *everyone* is suspicious, and he’s deeply annoyed five minutes in). The rain is still drizzling down, and if Five catches a cold from this he is going to stab somebody.

The visibility is also absolutely terrible. Five squints through the darkness. He can’t jump too often, or else he’ll risk running empty if a fight happens, but that means either staying far too long in places or moving around the old-fashioned way, which is annoyingly slow and obviates the entire point of putting the teleporter on perimeter duty. Five pushes aside a bit of hair plastered to his forehead and scowls to himself.

He compromises, and falls into a steady rhythm with a few minutes of cooldown in-between jumps. It draws out his stamina, and he can keep it up for hours and still fight if need be, at the cost of crashing like an elephant once he finally lets himself rest. But Klaus will be back by then, and it’ll be fine. If Klaus can’t handle a single group of mobsters (or even a few groups), Five will chop off his other arm.

On one of his check-ins, Smith is awake. He jolts at Five’s sudden appearance and stares, wide-eyed.

“- The colleague I mentioned,” Lacquer says, motioning Smith to calm down. “He’s friendly.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far,” Five says, looking Smith up and down with distaste. Smith looks exactly as one would expect a person to look if their father has just been assassinated and they’ve spent the past several days on the run from various mobs. Five finds himself unsympathetic, considering his own bedraggled state.

“You teleported,” Smith says stupidly.

“Glad to see we’re preserving one of the great intellects of the era,” Five says. He looks at Lacquer. “No change around the perimeter. You can stay awake until morning?”

“Yes,” Lacquer says. “That’s when Raithe is coming back?”

“He can take over watch, he doesn’t need to sleep,” Five runs his hand through his hair and huffs at the water trailing down his neck. “Check back in thirty,” he says, and jumps away.

Thankfully, the drizzle lets up somewhere around three in the morning, and Five can see further than half a block away. He allows himself a longer cooldown period, and feels his energy slowly recovering. Maybe he'll even be able to skip the crash.

It's nearly seven AM when Five sees them.

A group of seven men, heavyset and wearing clothing that doesn't *scream* 'thugs', but maybe murmurs it as an aside comment. Most of them obviously have concealed weapons. Five keeps an eye on them, but doesn't interfere, because there's a chance they're on differently-illegal business and have no concern for Smith at all.

Except they approach a prostitute standing on the corner, and she - fuck, she points them at the impound lot a block away. She must have seen Klaus dragging Smith in.

Five can take out seven men, even tired as he is, but their disappearance will be noted. The entire area will be swarming with mobsters by noon. They'll have to move Smith. He'll have to kill them quickly, before they can contact backup, and preferably in a way that doesn't give any clues as to his capabilities.

(He ignores the tiny part of him pointing out that to truly leave no trace of them, he'd have to kill the prostitute. It's *highly* doubtful she saw anything that could compromise them, and terminating her would just be overkill. It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she has dark curly hair and wears a flamboyantly clashing skirt and top, and has the same distant look Klaus gets when he tries to elide over the things he did to get drug money. *Nothing.*)

Five sighs, and follows the men. They pass by the payphone on the corner without pause, at least. Likely confident they can kill one wounded man and a random good samaritan. Upon reaching the impound gate, they dither for a moment, before one of them pulls out a set of lockpicks and sets to work.

The rest of the street has become mysteriously deserted. Typical.

The men slip inside, and that's when Five does as well.

There's little light streaming in through from the street, but Five has the advantage of surprise and not having to worry about anyone other than himself. Lacquer and Smith are safely under several feet of concrete, these guys have no such protection.

The gunfire is deafening, bouncing off the walls and rattling around his skull, but he's fought in worse. He can't help but taunt them a few times, sowing chaos as they try to pinpoint the source of the noise and throw more bullets at it. He has to jump more than he'd like, because he pushes one of the men into firing wildly and it's suicide to stand still in such a small space.

In the end, though, all the men are dead. All the cars on this floor have bullet holes in them, which isn't ideal, but it's not like they were pulling out clean from this one. Five sighs, and straightens his shirt -

- and then -

- his side *explodes* with pain -

- one last gunshot ringing out and -

- he falls and -

- catches himself and *twists* around to see -

- holding a gun, eyes cold -

“I’m sorry, Number Five,” Lacquer says. “Your contract has been terminated.”

Chapter End Notes

ahem

Please remember that I will be posting *two* chapters on Friday instead of the usual one. Thank you.

Chapter 16

Something Klaus really hates about being a ghost is being stuck with recon duty all the time. Recon is *boring.*

There are six factions that want Smith dead, and he has to spy on all of them. Or, well, there are a couple more, but Lacquer and her partner only managed to locate the headquarters of six of them. It's pretty impressive work, for people limited to conventional information-gathering methods.

It does mean, however, that Klaus has had a *long* night. And he hardly has any useful information, to boot. As he found out several years ago, just because you can eavesdrop without consequence doesn't mean that people will talk about what you want to hear. He knows a lot about the internal structures of all the major mobs in late 1950's New York, now, but somehow he doubts that will be very useful in the long run.

He did learn how to properly roll a cigar, though, so the night isn't a total waste.

From what he's gleaned, Smith is not a particularly high priority for at least three of the mobs. He's pretty sure that one of them is going to drop the chase in a day or two, and the other two within the week. The others are more zealous, unfortunately.

Klaus squints at the first rays of dawn peeking over the horizon. They explore the city hesitantly, shying away from dark corners and shady people. Klaus remembers a few mornings like this, back when he was alive. Languid and slow, everyone trudging along just to get to the next thing that will tell them they're still living. A transitional period.

He passes a prostitute standing on the corner and throws her an unseen salute. Represent.

And then -

- very faintly -

- a *crack.*

It's far away, and could probably be mistaken for a car backfiring. It's a sound that's common enough in neighborhoods like this. It's nothing Five can't handle.

Klaus runs anyways.

It's instinct. He can't help it. There's someone up ahead, someone *shooting at his little brother,* and it doesn't matter that Five can take care of himself, doesn't matter that he won't appreciate Klaus running in like a lunatic, doesn't *matter,* because he *can't* stay away. Couldn't if his life (existence, whatever) depended on it.

There's another *crack,* splitting through the air, and yes, it's coming from the impound lot, and the gate is open, fuck how'd they find it, and he runs in and -

It's hard to make sense of the scene, at first.

There are bodies. Lots of bodies, actually. Seems he missed a fight. Klaus keeps up his exclusion zone all the time now, barely pays attention to it anymore, and looking at these bodies he's thankful for that. These guys almost definitely left ghosts, and he doubts they're happy about dying so messily. There's bullet holes in all the cars around them, and glimpses of more bodies lying just out of sight, and seriously, what did Klaus miss?

Then he sees a head of hair rising into sight, and he feels a breath of relief. Five.

He jogs over (not visible yet, it's possible there's more people around), looks down and -

everything

freezes.

Blood. There's so much blood. There's a pool of it, where Five just got up from, and it doesn't make sense for a long moment until he sees the stain on Five's shirt, the grimace on his face, and there's so much blood *no* -

Klaus becomes corporeal so fast he has no memory of crossing the intervening space between them. His hands are on Five's torso, holding in the blood, *fuck* gutshot wounds are fucking *terrible.*

Five jerks in surprise under Klaus' hands. Klaus smiles shakily at him. "Shot again," he says, because he knows how much Five hates having his injuries fussed over. "You're really losing your touch."

"Klaus," Five rasps, eyes wide, and oh fuck. Oh, *fuck,* Five hasn't looked this panicked since Calhoun, what the fuck happened -

There's movement in the corner of his eye, a body rising -

- and Klaus doesn't think, doesn't hesitate, yanking the gun from Five's hand and sending energy *blazing* through his arm as he moves it, perfectly accurate as he pulls the trigger -

- and Lacquer falls to the ground, a bullet hole between her eyes, gun falling from her hand.

Klaus blinks. "What?"

"Trap," Five hisses. His fingers scrabble at Klaus' arm. "It's a *trap, Klaus, we need to* ***run -"***

Which is when the sound of heavy combat boots fills their ears.

Klaus invisibly pokes his head up over the cars to see a line of soldiers filing in through the gate. They're heavily armored, half of them wearing unfamiliar goggles, and only a few of them have guns, for some reason. They don't carry any identifying marks, but Klaus knows who they are anyways. Commission field grunts.

Fuck.

They converge on Klaus' location. Probably the goggles are infrared, and *Five* is perfectly visible. Klaus swears and ducks down again.

"Hold your wound shut," Klaus says to Five. "I'll take care of this, okay?"

"I know," Five grins, and hey, at least his teeth aren't bloody. That's a good sign.

Klaus puts the gun down next to Five and rises. The grunts are closer now, which really just won't stand.

Making a beeline though several cars to the nearest soldier, Klaus pushes energy through himself until he's practically *humming* with it. Right as he reaches the soldier, one without goggles, there's a burst of radio that comes from their helmet, and right before Klaus' fist connects he hears -

"Anders, Raithe is coming at you -!"

And then the soldier's head snaps back from Klaus' superstrong punch, helmet broken, skull caved in, body falling forward, and Klaus freezes, ice water flooding through him.

He whirls around, and all the soldiers with goggles a looking right. At. Him.

Well.

Fuck.

- the goggles, he has to get rid of the goggles, they can't see him without them -

Klaus sprints towards the nearest soldier looking at him. The soldier skitters back and sidesteps his first punch, which is a little embarrassing but Klaus is cutting himself some slack here, he's just had a bit of a shock and his little brother is lying in a pool of his own blood thirty feet away.

The other soldiers are coming to this one's aid, weaving around cars, and Klaus makes another jab and the soldier dodges and -

- grabs his other arm.

His *noncorporeal* arm.

Klaus cries out in shock. The soldier's gauntlet - and it is a gauntlet, now that he sees it up close, sleek and metallic and heavy - glows blue when it touches him, a *hummm* filling the air.

Klaus *floods* himself with energy and rips out of the soldier's grasp. He staggers back.

The soldier lunges for him, and he ducks away. The other soldiers converge, and Klaus can see they all wear the same gauntlets. One of the goggled soldiers points at Klaus and he can just her the tinny radio coming from all their helmets as it relays *"He's there!"*

His arm hurts. He looks down at it, and there's a silvery-blue sheen where the gauntlet touched him, like a luminescent burn wound. It feels like one, too, and god, he'd almost forgotten what physical pain felt like. His breath comes in short gasps, and he's not sure he could cease breathing if he tried.

Shapes flicker at the edge of his vision. Distantly, he realizes he's stopped keeping the ghosts away.

The soldiers reach out for him, and Klaus ducks under their hands. He throws himself through their bodies, and pops up in the middle of a car. He looks out the window at them, and tries to scramble for a plan.

They can see him. They can touch him. They can *hurt* him. Okay. Okay. That makes things a bit more difficult.

That doesn't mean it's game over. Klaus is still very skilled, and they need to get within melee range. He just needs to keep them at arm's length. Or preferably more. If he gets his hands on a gun -

They surround the car, hands at the ready. But Klaus isn't limited by two dimensions. Quick as a blink, he clambers through the roof of the car to stand atop it, and leaps over their heads. A gauntlet brushes his ankle, and he grimaces as he lands. He sprints away at top speed, and as he looks over his shoulder he sees most of the soldiers following.

Most.

Because two of them are peeling off. Two of them are turning around, pulling out guns, headed towards -

Towards Five.

Klaus *slams* to a stop. He turns on a dime, and whips through cars as he fucking *flies* towards Five, racing those fucking shitstains that think they can *take away his little brother* -

One of them turns to meet him, probably warned by the others, but Klaus doesn't care, and he takes the fucker down in a flying tackle. He ignores the gauntlets grasping at him, and punches *hard,* feels the helmet and skull cave in, and he doesn't waste time before rolling off the body and going after the other one.

They haven't stopped, and they reach the car Five is behind the same time Klaus does, but that's as far as they get because Klaus tackles this one too, and they don't get to use those *fucking* gauntlets before they, too, get a megaton punch to the face.

"Klaus?" Five says. He looks up to see Five's wide eyes, fixed on him. No, Klaus realizes. Fixed on his wounds, shiny and faintly glowing in the early morning light.

"They've got things that can hurt me," Klaus says in a rush, and snatches up the gun from the fallen soldier. "Dunno what, but it fucking stings, looks like R&D got a budget boost -"

And then he can't talk anymore, because the rest of the soldiers are upon them.

The gun doesn't help as much as he'd like. They're all *heavily* armored, and while he can shoot the goggled ones directly in the eye, the non-goggled ones have opaque facial visors that take two bullets to crack open. He tries to focus on the goggled ones, since if they can't *see* him he'll have no trouble taking the rest out, but they seem to have realized this and send in the non-goggled ones first, and he can't let anyone get close to Five.

Then the gun *clicks* dry, and he curses. He glances over at Five, who wordlessly hands him their original gun, but that has even fewer bullets, and they're gone in a blink.

Five looks pale, and Klaus knows it's not just from bloodloss.

"Klaus -" he croaks.

And he probably knows what Klaus is going to do even before Klaus himself does, because Five has always been the smarter of the two of them. Klaus grins, brilliant and sharp and wild, and reaches out to touch his brother's shoulder.

"Love you, Five," he says, and runs out.

He hears Five screaming behind him, begging him *no no no Klaus no come back* ***Klaus -*** but he's flying, sprinting, moving faster than humanly possible, he doesn't even feel the pain anymore, energy exploding through him like fireworks as he crashes into one of the soldiers, smashing their head to paste, ignoring the gauntlets that burn him to his core.

Everything is filled with brilliant, searing clarity, and he moves and reaches for the next soldier, grabbing ahold of their gauntlet and ignoring how his hand crumbles as he pulls them forward to meet his other fist. He drops that body and kicks out at a leg, hears the *crunch* as it bends backward, ducks and slams a fist into a chest to send them flying back.

He's a whirlwind of glowing blue death, vibrant color and deafening sound. The ghosts are screaming and shouting and shrieking, lost in the orgy of violence. He might be screaming too. He might be laughing, as well.

There's too much pain to think beyond inflicting more, too much blue to see the red of the blood coating him, too much of *Five* running through his head to think of himself.

And then

there is

light

that

blots

out

the

world.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

ATTENTION: I have posted two chapters today. This is the second. Please be aware.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Love you, Five.”

No. No, no, no. That’s a lie. If Klaus loved him he wouldn’t be running out to meet the soldiers, the ones that could hurt him, the ones that *did* hurt him, and leave Five here. He wouldn’t do that, not if he loved Five.

Five screams at him. He doesn’t know the words coming out of his mouth, but he thinks they’re along the lines of *no, no, please, don’t, Klaus,* ***no -***

Except Klaus isn’t listening, and he disappears from view and the only sound Five can hear is the roaring of his heartbeat in his ears and his own distant screaming.

Five remembers -

“Did -” Five clears his throat as Klaus looks at him. He sets down the pen, carefully, and doesn’t look at his brother as he forces the words out of his throat. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?” Klaus asks. Five can hear the frown in his voice. “The locations? Yeah, of course, there’s enough to last for weeks -”

“No,” Five interrupts, because if he doesn’t then he’ll just agree, and he needs to know. He needs to. “Not that. I mean - before. When you said. You said - you wouldn’t leave. Did you mean that.”

He doesn’t turn his head, tries to pretend he’s unaffected by the answer, because honestly, what kind of ***child*** *is he that he’d need a reassurance like that? Ridiculous. Next thing he knew he’d be looking forward to Klaus’ plan to give him hugs every day.*

“What?” Klaus says, and Five can’t help but give the tiniest of flinches at the surprise in his tone. Idiot, he shouldn’t have put so much stock in it, Klaus obviously just said it to calm him down, it’s not like it was a binding oath or anything.

“Right,” Five picks up the pen again, and forces his hand to stop shaking. “You said the water was in the brown house?” he says, and he’s proud of how level his voice is.

“Five -” Klaus says.

“And the trail mix is in the house next door,” Five continues clinically. He taps the map in front of him. He doesn’t look at Klaus. “So our route would be -”

“Five, of course I fucking meant it, what the fuck!”

Five’s voice fails him, and he looks at Klaus.

The expression on Klaus’ face is a mixture of confusion and anger, and he folds his arms to glare at Five. “I fucking meant every word, you idiot. I’m not leaving. God, why would you think that?”

Five opens his mouth. He realizes he doesn’t know what to say. He closes it, and swallows.

“Oh,” he manages, eventually.

Klaus’ eyes soften. “I’m not leaving,” he says, slower this time, with a weight to his words that makes the air shiver, just a little bit. “Not ever. Okay? Promise.”

Five shivers as the words settle over his skin. He looks at his brother.

“Okay,” he says.

Five realizes that not all the screaming he’s hearing is his own.

It’s Klaus, Klaus who’s screaming, and Five can’t see what’s happening, where his brother is, what’s causing him to *scream* like that -

He lets go of his wound, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t *matter,* not when Klaus is screaming like that. Five drags himself along the floor, blood smearing the concrete, why can’t he move *faster* -

He pulls himself around the car in time to see -

- bodies lying broken, limbs askew, blood painting the ground like spilled wine -

- blue light tinting the air, bathing the surroundings in an eerie glow -

- and Klaus, so fast he’s a blur, bleeding brilliant blue light, half of him just wisps of energy, laughing and screaming in an inhuman pitch, moving jerkily like a stop-motion film except for when he moves far more fluidly than any physical being could, switching between the two states at random. It hurts to look at him, Five’s brain trying to insist what he’s seeing isn’t *right.*

There’s movement in the corners of Five’s vision, and he whips his head around to see the ghosts. They’re flickering in and out of visibility, split-seconds here and there. They’re dancing and screaming at the spectacle before them, mouths agape, bloody hands raised.

One of the soldiers, the few who are still standing, lunges for a fallen body. They fumble for something, hands tearing frantically at straps.

No, no, no, he can't let them do whatever they're doing, they're trying to hurt Klaus, they think they have something that can hurt him more, the soldier is lifting something up -

- Five claws his way to the soldier, snarling, he'll kill them with his bare hand if he has to -

- he grabs onto their arm as they lift up a cylinder, mouth glowing that horrible silver-blue, and yanks it down. The aim is pulled off, and there's a whine from the machine.

The soldier looks at him, and he bares his teeth, reaches for them -

- they lean over a little, and he can just hear the words -

"Your equations were very helpful, Number Five."

- and for one long, long moment, he doesn't understand.

And then he does.

Five remembers -

"Don't you ever take a break, mein bruder?" Klaus says, waltzing into the room. Literally, he's holding Delores and spinning around to what looks like a bastardized ballroom dance.

"Once in a blue moon, I look up the definition, just to remind myself how useless it is," Five replies, peering at the numbers on the board. He erases one with a scowl.

Klaus sighs, and sets Delores down. He comes over and, before Five can protest, scoops him up in a bear hug.

***"Klaus,"** Five snarls at him, pushing his brother's chest. It's like pushing a block of stone, and from the slight sheen of blue Five can tell Klaus is channeling superstrength. "Let me go, you idiot -"*

"Nope," Klaus says cheerfully. "You've been working enough for today, time to go outside and get some fresh air. Well, as fresh as the air ever is in the apocalypse, but it's getting better, I'm pretty sure. Today's a nice day."

"Klaus -" Five cuts himself off with a growl. He knows his brother, and if Klaus has decided Five is going outside, then he's going outside and nothing Five says will change that. "Twenty more minutes," he says instead. "Twenty minutes, and I won't argue, I promise."

Klaus stops and seems to debate with himself for a minute, before letting go. "Alright," he says. "Twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes later, Klaus comes back and raises an eyebrow at the scribble-covered chalkboard. "Wow," he says, surveying it. "What's all this?"

Five scowls at him. "It's the preliminary equations for figuring out how to punch you even in incorporeal form," he informs Klaus.

Klaus giggles. "Ooo! Are you going to figure out how to re-kill me with the power of math, Fivey?"

"I most certainly fucking am," Five threatens. "Just you watch."

Five's hand slips numbly off the soldier's arm.

He watches, as if from very far away, how the cylinder glows with silver-blue light. It grows brighter, brighter, brighter, like a tiny star.

The soldier turns away from Five, lifts the cylinder again, points -

"No," Five gasps soundlessly, reaching out -

but

there

is

a

light

that

blots

out

the

world.

****

Five can't hear himself screaming.

He must be. Has to be.

Where is Klaus?

"Love you, Five."

No, no, no.

Five pushes himself up - where is he? - and looks around.

There are soldiers. Not many. Just two. One struggles to stand, pulling himself up by a car a dozen feet away. The other is walking towards him.

Five blinks at them.

They pull out a gun, and Five barely manages to throw himself to the side in time. The bullet punctures through his right shoulder.

The shock of pain jolts through him. He sees the soldier aim again. Without thinking about it, he *jumps*.

It's like tearing himself apart from the inside out. Abruptly, he's reminded of the other gunshot wound in his torso. It's still bleeding.

Klaus can fix that. Where is Klaus?

Five's vision wobbles. He's on the street. He hears the two soldiers running out of the building. One of them spots him, sprawled out on the pavement. They shout and point.

Five grits his teeth, and *jumps* again.

It's worse this time, but he lands atop the roof of the impound lot. If he strains himself, he can hear the soldiers questioning each other. He hears one say *"he went back inside!"*

Ah. The tracker. Of course. Klaus needs to remove that.

"Love you, Five."

No.

Five pulls himself up. He doesn't have time. They're coming. He doesn't have *time.*

Except -

Doesn't he have all the time he needs? Isn't that what he's been working on for so, so long?

Five's breath comes quickly. He looks down at his hand.

He's not ready. He's not. But the equations come together in his mind, written in blood and light, and he clenches his fist.

A haze appears. He remembers that haze, for all he only ever produced it once before.

Five swallows. Looks around.

Everything is blurry, for some reason.

"Love you, Five."

Five sobs, and a crack in reality appears in front of him.

It shivers, pulsing with energy. A storm of lightning, the smell of ozone in the air. It widens.

He hears banging from the access door behind him, the soldiers trying to break through.

An image appears in the rift.

People. He's looking at people. Five people.

Something comes flying out at him. It clatters to a halt next to him. A fire extinguisher.

Five reaches out and

pushes.

He's screaming. He's screaming, because he's being torn apart and reformed, ripped into so many pieces there isn't enough of him left to think, turned inside-out and atomized and broken apart.

He *pushes,* just a bit more, just a bit, and then he's falling.

There's an impact, and Five isn't moving anymore, but it hurts. It still hurts, why does it hurt so much?

He sobs.

Why does it hurt so much?

"Does anyone else see….little Number Five, or is that just me?"

Five lifts his eyes. He has to blink, tears and blood mixing to block his vision. He stares.

His siblings stare back. Tall, standing strong, they look just like they did when he found their bodies. Luther, Diego, Allison, Vanya. He knows Ben is here, too. He must be.

Because Klaus is standing there as well, eyes wide, shock and confusion and awe warring for dominance on his face.

Five remembers -

Kneeling on the dusty ground, heart in his throat, staring at his brother, his only family left in the world, sitting next to his own grave and looking, confusedly, at Five.

"You lost me," Klaus says. He flickers again, in and out, a candle flame in the shape of his brother. Fragile and thin, like he'll blow away in the breeze. His voice sounds like it's coming from far away.

Five is crying. He knows he's crying, and for once he doesn't care, doesn't even try to wipe them away. He shakes, the tremors wracking through his body.

Klaus thinks Five is going to leave him. He can't wrap his head around the concept. Why does Klaus think that? Why does he think Five will jump back and - and ***erase*** *him?*

No. No, he wouldn't do that. He couldn't do that. Klaus is - he's the one person left Five loves. He can't even think of erasing him. Of leaving him.

He leans forward, hands gripping his pants and teeth gritted, and he says, as clearly as he can, "I'm taking you with me. We're going ***together.*** *You - you promised me, so I promise you, I'm not leaving you. Okay?"*

Klaus is wide-eyed, shocked and confused and awed, and Five feels the tears on his face and the dust in the air and the earth under his feet and he has never, ever been so aware of everything, all at once. He stares at Klaus, flickering like a candle in the wind, and sees the careful, solemn nod.

Five stares at his brother, wearing a mirror image of that expression from so, so long ago.

I broke it, Five thinks. *I broke my promise, Klaus. I'm sorry.*

But you broke yours first.

"I'm back," Five says, and the words taste like blood. "I'm home."

Chapter End Notes

.....I really am sorry. For what it's worth.

The final story will begin posting on Monday.

Works inspired by this one

Fanart for Comes and Goes (In Waves) Series by hujwernoo by siriuspiggyback

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!